THE SHADOW ON THE DIAL

AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

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THE CENTURY CO.

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"I wanted you girls to see it the minute it was fixed," said Ronny

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BY

AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

Author of "The Adventure of the Seven Keyholes," "Sally Simms Adventures It," "Bluebonnet Bend," "The Sapphire Signet"

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TO

THE BELOVED MEMORY OF

ROBERT REECE SEAMAN

WHO SHARED WITH ME THE

PLANNING OF THIS BOOK

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Pettigrew's Folly	3
II	Leila's Point of View	17
III	The Sun-Dial	30
IV	A Record of the Past	43
V	Leila Presents Some Difficulties	56
VI	Leila Improves an Afternoon	72
VII	Ronny Gets Down to Brass Tacks	82
VIII	Leila Provides Some Surprises	95
IX	Events Move On	109
X	Cousin Frances Entertains	124
XI	Ronny Finds Himself up a Tree	137
XII	One Dramatic Day	150
XIII	A Conference with Coosaw	167
XIV	The Beginning of the End	181
XV	Grandma Fletcher Completes the Record	201
XVI	The Shadow on the Dial	212

ILLUSTRATIONS

"I wanted you girls to see it the minute it was fixed," said Ronny . . . . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

What was their astonishment to behold a ponderous limousine parked before the front steps . . 12

"Suppose we roll it over and see what's underneath" 52

They made a mad dash for shelter 158

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CHAPTER I

PETTIGREW'S FOLLY

"COME, Enid! It's time we were going home."

"Oh, let's stay just a little longer! It can't be time for the mail yet, and we want to get that on the way back. It's heavenly here this afternoon, Naomi!"

"Well, I reckon a few moments longer won't matter." And Naomi Fletcher settled back in her comfortable seat among the roots of a great live-oak tree and turned her attention once more to the book in her lap. Her younger sister, Enid, continued her parade up and down the long avenue that led to the steps ascending to the house—a curious little figure draped in great

strands of gray Spanish moss that hung from her head clear to her feet. She was also decorated with a wreath of red japonica blossoms stuck in the moss that surrounded her brows.

"Whatever are you playing at, Enid?" called Naomi, with lazy interest, as she snuggled more deeply into the heap of moss she had piled up against the tree for a cushion. Her book had temporarily ceased to interest her and her sister's actions certainly were peculiar, for Enid was gesticulating and murmuring to herself in a way that suggested an escaped lunatic more than anything else. But Naomi always found Enid's play-acting worth inquiring into.

"Huh! Can't you see I'm Queen Titania in 'Midsummer Night's Dream'? And I do wish you'd come and be Oberon or something. I'm tired of doing it all by myself."

"I don't feel like acting anything to-day; and besides, it's too late now," Naomi answered. "And I'm tired of acting Shakspere, anyhow. Tell you what! Let's come here to-morrow and hunt up some old clothes in the attic and play Sherman's army is coming and the mansion is going to be attacked."

"Hurrah! All right. You be the beautiful

Mrs. Harvey Pettigrew defending her home and we'll get old Coosaw and Missouri to be the faithful slaves that help you. And I'll be old Sherman! We'll have a heap of fun." Enid was all enthusiasm and interest. She discarded the japonica blossoms and Spanish moss and went to sit by her sister under the live-oak. "I never get tired of playing that," she added, "and the setting is so wonderful!"

They both glanced back at the stately old mansion at the end of the broad avenue of live-oaks which led to the veranda steps. These steps were of brick, ascending in a gracious sweep to a wide portico running the length of the house front. The roof of the mansion was steeply "hipped," and without the customary dormer-windows on the third floor. Great curved wings flanked each end of the main building, and long, many-paned windows, innocent of glass, stared like sightless eyes. Neglect and decay had touched the place with blighting fingers, and only two gorgeously blossoming japonica bushes flanking the steps suggested that life had ever been vivid, gracious, or beautiful in this lonely wilderness.

"It must have been wonderful, before the

war!" sighed Naomi. "Too bad that they should have called it 'Pettigrew's Folly.' It seems too stately a place for that name. I wish they hadn't changed it! I've heard Grandma say it was originally called Cotesworth Hall, years and years ago when old Judge Cotesworth built it. It wasn't so big as this then—only that old part in the back and some that was torn down afterward. But when Mr. Pettigrew of Charleston married the judge's niece, Lucilla Stepney, he started to make it into a regular mansion, as beautiful as any in Charleston. He tore down some of the old part and built all this new front and the wings, and that gorgeous hall inside with the curving stairs. Every one, they say, told him he was kind of crazy to begin it, for it was eighteen-sixty, and the war was threatening. But he had plenty of money and he didn't think the trouble would last long, so he only laughed at them and went ahead. The war came, though, before he got it finished, and he went right into it and was killed the second year. So they always called it 'Pettigrew's Folly' after that."

At that moment, Enid caught sight of an infirm old colored man hobbling out from the

back of the house, an ax under his arm, evidently bound to replenish the woodpile.

"There's old Coosaw!" she exclaimed. "Let's get him to come over and tell us again about how they hid the silver when they heard the Yankees were coming, and how Mrs. Harvey Pettigrew stood on the steps and met them, and what happened to the sun-dial, and all that. I never get tired of hearing him tell it. He gets so excited."

"No," decided Naomi, "we mustn't stay another minute. The sun's going down and Grandma will be worried. You gather up our books while I go and find Beauty and Spot."

She set off toward a near-by field where two shaggy ponies were grazing, and came back leading each by its bridle. Ten minutes later, the two girls were cantering along the white oyster-shell road through the sweet-scented South Carolina pine barrens, toward the little village of Burton, two miles away. Between the tall trunks and undergrowth of scrub palmetto and swamp-cypress, the girls could catch fleeting glimpses of the sunset sky and a beautiful river winding between its marsh islands. Swamp-maples stood decked in crimson-tasseled

blossoms, and in the air there was an odor of budding jessamine. Naomi, in the dignity of her sixteen years, rode along sedately, with only an occasional remark to her pony, "Spot." But Enid, three years younger, sang or whistled as the fancy took her and urged her mount through every brown runlet of swamp water that skirted the route. Presently they turned into the head of the main village street, cantered down its length toward the river, and drew up at the door of the tiny box of a post-office, where Enid dismounted and ran in for the mail.

She came out with empty hands, but her dark eyes were snapping with excitement and news.

"No letters . . . but Mr. Collins says there's company over at our house. We'd better hurry back. Strangers, he says. Some people that came in here and wanted to know where they could find a place to stay for the night. Mrs. Taunton's boarding-house is full up with salesmen, so he sent them over to Grandma. She'll probably want us to help, so we'd better rush!"

In a breathless hurry, Enid mounted her pony and they galloped away. Crossing Fletcher's Cove over the narrow wooden bridge,

they arrived somewhat winded at their own back door.

Grandma Fletcher—white-haired, tiny, but amazingly active—came out, dusting her hands together energetically in a way she had when excited.

"You-all come right in here and get busy!" she called to them gaily. "Company's here . . . strangers . . . and Hagar is rushing to get her biscuits into the oven and I've been fixing the rooms. Enid, you set the table; and Naomi, you run over to Mrs. Gervais and see if she can't give you some jonquils and japonicas for it. I hate a table without flowers, and none of ours are out yet. Hurry, all of you; you hear?"

Grandma Fletcher's gay energy was always infectious and the girls found themselves rushing to do her bidding, not even giving themselves time to inquire who the company might be. It was not till supper was at last on the table, and Grandma had tinkled the little silver bell, that their curiosity could be satisfied. Out from one room emerged a stout, heavy, red-faced man accompanied by a boy of about fifteen who was as thin, pale, and delicate in appearance as his companion was the opposite. Out from the other

room came a young girl of Naomi's age, apparently, very up-to-date in dress, whose slightly supercilious expression was belied by a pair of beautiful and appealing brown eyes.

"Mr. Speer, from Bridgeport, Connecticut," Grandma Fletcher introduced them, "and his daughter, Miss Leila, and his son Ronald. They came out here from Savannah to-day. Mr. Speer's thinking of buying some property in Burton." There was a murmur of desultory remarks and they all sat down to the table, Grandma Fletcher supplying most of the chat and Mr. Speer replying in brief monosyllables. The young people contributed nothing to the conversation. Naomi and Enid felt very much in the dark about the status of these guests till Grandma Fletcher whispered to them in the kitchen after supper:

"That's *the* Speer—the 'Shoe King,' they call him. You know—Speer's Shoes. He's rolling in wealth, they say. Going to buy up some big property around Burton and make it his winter home. Mr. Tripp told me Speer was all around here in his big car last week, looking up places. He likes the coast here . . . thinks the hunt-

ing and fishing are good . . . and wants his son to stay here a while 'cause he's kind of delicate."

"What place does he think of buying?" queried Naomi.

"Don't know yet . . . or, at least, he hasn't decided, I reckon. A good many of those plantations are for sale. Heard he was over at the Stickneys' across the river, among others." And Grandma turned her attention to domestic matters.

The girls saw no more of the visitors that night, as the new-comers retired to their respective rooms directly after supper. Nor were they up next morning when Naomi and Enid ate their breakfast and hurried away to school. When they returned to dinner, at noon, they caught a brief glimpse of the strangers, but the three were nowhere about when the girls got back at three o'clock. Grandma Fletcher explained, however, that they were intending to remain another day at least, and had gone off somewhere in their car.

"Well, they're nothing to us!" sighed Enid, who had, however, been secretly hoping they

might become acquainted with the young folks. "Let's go and do what we planned yesterday, Naomi."

They saddled the ponies and galloped off after consuming a hasty snack of gingersnaps and jam in the kitchen, and taking along a liberal supply as a bribe to carry to old Coosaw and his wife, Missouri, that the two negroes might lend their assistance in the play the girls intended to stage that afternoon.

What, then, was their astonishment, on entering the unkempt grounds about "Pettigrew's Folly," to behold a big dark-blue limousine parked before the front steps. And to spy further old Coosaw and Missouri bowing and curtsying to a bulky figure just emerging from the door, on to the portico. At the same instant, from around toward the back of the mansion, there strolled the boy and girl who had spent the night before in the Fletcher home.

"Hullo! What you doing here?" called Ronald Speer, who from the first had seemed more inclined to be friendly than either of the other strangers.

"Be quiet, Ronny! That's no affair of yours," admonished the girl, languidly, in tones the two

What was their astonishment to behold a ponderous limousine parked before the front steps

could perfectly hear as their ponies ambled up the drive.

"Oh, we often come here—nearly every day, in fact," answered Enid, conversationally, as their ponies came to a stop near the car. "We've always liked the old place, it's so picturesque, and we ride over here to study and read and . . . and . . . do lots of things. The place belonged to a relative of ours once and we . . . sort of . . . love it."

"It's horridly tumble-down," offered Miss Leila Speer, her supercilious expression intensified to the nth degree.

"Yes, it is," acknowledged Naomi, "but we love it just the same, in spite of that. I think it's all the more interesting for being old, especially if you know its history."

"I'll say it is!" agreed Ronny, a glow of color coming into his pale cheeks. "I think an old place like this is the cat's mittens, all right, and the more tumble-down it is, the better I like it. Gee! Just look at those big chimneys up there and that corkscrew staircase . . . or whatever you call it . . . inside. It's like the things you read about. And I'll bet it has *some* history, too!"

His slang somewhat took the girls' breath away. While they were trying to think of a suitable response, Mr. Speer came down the steps and entered his car, nodding to Enid and Naomi.

"I'm going over to the next plantation," he told his children. "You were there yesterday, so you probably won't care to come. Stay here for a while and talk to these young folks. I'll be back later." And he had started the engine and driven away before they could reply.

"Come over by that big tree on the river bank," suggested Enid to the rest, "and we'll gather some Spanish moss and sit down and be comfortable." She turned the ponies loose as she spoke, and gathered up a great armful of moss from the lawn and led the others to the roots of the immense live-oak under which Naomi had sat the day before. Here, spreading the moss for a cushion, they all sat down around the gnarled trunk, Leila lowering herself very gingerly, lest she damage her pale fawn-colored sports-suit. It was obvious that she was bored to extinction.

"Now, tell us all about the place!" demanded Ronny, curling his thin legs under him in the

moss. "Gee! but that river is blue, though! Ain't it different from that copper-colored old Savannah! And what's that big old white stone lying right over there? Looks like a piece of marble. Queer place for it—right on the river bank."

"That's a sun-dial," Naomi enlightened him. "It used to stand there in the middle of the lawn, before the war—the war between the States, I mean. It was a beautiful piece of white marble on a fluted pillar, with a broad marble base. They say it was sent here from England, when the house was built. Then, one night during the war something happened to it . . . nobody knows quite what, but it was found next morning lying where it is now, with the top, the dial part, gone, and no one has ever found it since."

"Well, doesn't that beat the Dutch!" marveled Ronny. "Did the Yankees come along and knock spots out of the old ranch, too?"

Enid answered by giving him a little account of the history of the place and was just about to launch into a description of what happened as Sherman's army was approaching, when the snort of a car was heard and Mr. Speer's limousine once more entered the battered gate at

the end of the driveway. Two minutes later, T. G. Speer, the Shoe King, stood before them, a smile of rather grim satisfaction on his usually impassive countenance.

"Well, I've done it!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands and glancing at his boy. "Do you like this place, son?"

"Sure I like it!" cried Ronny. "I told you I thought it was a crackerjack!"

"Can't see what you like about it, myself. To my mind it ain't a patch on the Stickney place . . . house gone all to pieces that way. But you're the one to be suited, son. I'll go in to Savannah and buy this here Pettigrew place to-morrow morning. But I warn you, I gotta tear down that old rat-trap and build a new house . . . and it may take all summer."

For reasons quite unknown to the Shoe King, his announcement sent a pang of utmost dismay to the hearts of at least two of his audience.

CHAPTER II

LEILA'S POINT OF VIEW

MISS LEILA SPEER, the Shoe King's daughter, sat in her bedroom at Grandma Fletcher's house in Burton and indignantly reviewed the prospect. The rest of her family—indeed, the entire household—had long since gone to bed, but there was no sleep yet in prospect for the disgruntled daughter of the shoe millionaire.

She sat, robed in a pink satin negligée trimmed with swan's-down, rocking disconsolately in a somewhat decrepit rocker, on her lap a magazine devoted to moving-picture interests, one hand traveling mechanically at regular intervals to a huge box of chocolates on the table at her side. On the wide old hearth under the mantel, a log fire was dying down into embers, and a small kerosene lamp on the table furnished but feeble light to eyes used to the judiciously shaded brilliance of electricity. Miss Leila Speer

snorted contemptuously as she glanced at it.

"Expect a person to *see* with a light like *that!*" she muttered, turning up the wick till it smoked, then hastily turning it down again. "I call it downright *outrageous!* What can Dad be thinking of?" She searched among the chocolates for her particular nut-centered favorite and found none, which incident only served to add another grievance to her rapidly increasing list. "Can't even get any more candy in this dump when these are gone, I suppose." She solaced her woes with a large piece of *nougat* which kept her inarticulate for a few moments, but did not interfere with her thoughts.

And, from her own point of view, she certainly had some very real woes to endure. Early that morning her father had announced that pending negotiations for the purchase of Pettigrew's Folly, which transaction would probably take a week or more, he wished his son and daughter to remain at Grandma Fletcher's home and have the benefit of the delightful outdoor life it offered. He himself would be obliged to travel back and forth between Burton and Savannah frequently, and he felt that his children

would be in a more wholesome environment at Burton than they would be in a hotel in the city. He was anxious about his son, whose health was far from robust, and for whose sake he was selecting this pleasant region as a winter home, in the hope that its delightful climate would have a bracing effect on the boy.

All this Leila realized, quite as well as any one, but it in no wise altered her firm conviction that her own convenience outweighed all other considerations. Why couldn't they have stayed just as well in the comfortable hotel in Savannah where they had spent two nights? There she would have had at hand everything she most enjoyed—unlimited shopping in the stores on Broughton Street, chocolates, ice-cream, and the most soul-satisfyingly elaborate "sundaes" at the confectioners', and a different movie three times a day if there were time to get them in. Also there was an orchestra at the hotel in the evening, and dancing which she could have watched, and her father would probably have been too much occupied to bother about what time she retired to bed.

And in contrast to all these delights, just see what she had to endure in "this dump," as she

had slangily and irreverently christened it. A cold, ill-lighted, and inconvenient bedroom. There was neither a telephone nor electricity in the town. No movies, no shops except two or three depressing "general stores," nothing to look at, nothing to do except to sit all day long on the veranda and stare through ragged streamers of dirty-gray Spanish moss at some flat marsh islands out in the river.

True, there were two girls in the house with whom she might fraternize if she chose, but they didn't seem to be her kind at all. They were always dressed in middy blouses, and spent their time galloping around on a pair of shaggy ponies, when they weren't at school, and they appeared to be totally uninterested in most of the things that absorbed her mind.

Moreover, they persistently haunted the ramshackle old "ranch" her father had been foolish enough to insist on purchasing, and she felt sure that there was something about it that they were hiding and didn't want the Speers to know. For Leila was quick-witted and observant, and she had noticed the uneasy glance that passed between Naomi and Enid when her

father announced his intention of buying the plantation and tearing down the house. You couldn't fool *her!*

Worst of all, Ronny seemed eager to make friends with them. He took particular pains to be nice to them and evidently was trying to cultivate their acquaintance. It was all very provoking. Leila shivered and cast a glance at the open fire, which she discovered to have died down to gray ashes.

"No use sitting up any longer!" she groaned. "I'm not going to dirty my hands building the old thing up again. Might as well crawl into bed. Oh dear! What a life!" Ten minutes later she was comfortably asleep, her grievances temporarily forgotten.

She started on another dreary day the next morning when she arose (at a quarter before ten) and breakfasted in solitary state. The girls had long since departed for school. Ronny was off somewhere on a tramp by himself and Mr. Speer had shut himself up in his room to go over many business papers. For a while Leila sat disconsolately on the veranda and surveyed the horizon and indulged in regretful thoughts of

Savannah and the moving-pictures. Then suddenly, of sheer boredom, an inspiration was born.

The blue limousine was housed in the barn. It was standing idle and there wasn't any reason in the world why she shouldn't take it out and have a run. True, her father didn't particularly approve of her driving the car alone, though he had had both his children taught to run it very skilfully. But he was busy now and wouldn't notice, and she would only take it up the road a bit. She hurried to the barn and got the car out with as little noise as possible. Grandma Fletcher was busy baking, and, besides, it was no affair of hers if the girl chose to take the car out. Ronny was away and couldn't interfere, and the Shoe King was so immersed in a mass of figures that he never even heard it. Unhampered by any unwelcome objections, Leila drove, rejoicing, through the gate.

For one wild moment she contemplated taking a run in to Savannah and at least replenishing her supply of candy and movie magazines. But Savannah was over thirty miles away and she knew that her father would be furious if she were to venture alone on such a jaunt. So

she turned the big car in the other direction and, for lack of any more definite destination, decided to run out to Pettigrew's Folly. On the way, a brilliant idea occurred to her. As she was going to be there without any inconveniently curious small brother to annoy her, she would do a little exploring for herself and see if she could discover what it was about the "rickety old hole" (her own description of the lovely spot!) that attracted the two girls who said they spent so much time there.

As she bowled along the white oyster-shell road, narrowly escaping being mired in unsuspected and treacherous ruts, the notion began to appeal to her more and more. She planned to get the key of the house from the old negro who lived in one of the shanties at the rear, and go all through the place by herself and look through the closets and dig around and see if there were any secret passages or hidden treasure or anything of that sort. *She'd* find out what it was those girls had "up their sleeves" (as she put it) and beat them at their own game. And, after all, why shouldn't she, when this was to be her own home? She had a perfect right to know!

She turned expertly into the ancient driveway and whirled up to the stately front door. Old Coosaw, seeing the now familiar big blue car, hobbled around to greet the occupant, politely concealing any surprise he might feel at the unusualness of her visit.

"Yassum, miss, yassum!" he acquiesced when she demanded the key. "An' Missouri, she go wid yo' an show yo' all 'round!" he added, pulling the big key from his pocket and handing it to her.

"But I don't want her!" cried Leila, exasperated. "I don't need anybody to show me around. I went around the other day." Then another thought occurred to her and she quickly reversed her decision. Missouri might be useful in giving her information that she needed and couldn't get any other way. "Oh, well! Let her come, then," she hastily amended, and Coosaw went off to send his wife to the house.

It was a singular hour that the Shoe King's daughter spent in that dilapidated but still beautiful old mansion. From empty room to empty room she wandered, peeping into musty closets, opening doors into unexpected passageways, poking into cracks in the paneled fire-

places, even bending down to stare up the flues of wide old chimneys, and getting thoroughly dusty and disheveled—a state which she abhorred under ordinary circumstances.

When these explorations came to an end and had failed to yield the slightest interesting disclosure, she began to question Missouri, who had followed her about in ever-increasing concern as to what she could possibly be hunting for.

"Yo' ain't lost nuffin, Miss Leila, is yo'?" the old woman had asked, after the first ten minutes of hectic search. "'Cause Ah done went all ober de place after yo'-all left, tudder day, an' Ah ain't found nuffin a-tall."

"Oh, no! Of course I haven't lost anything!" exclaimed Leila, impatiently slamming a closet door. "I was just looking over this old d—I mean place. It's a queer old ranch, isn't it? Must have been lots of secret places to hide things, and queer things must have happened here . . . and all that. Now, haven't there?"

A veil of blankness seemed suddenly to descend on old Missouri's wrinkled countenance.

"Yassum, yassum!" she agreed hastily. "Ah spects so. But Ah ain't know nuffin 'bout 'em.

Dey's t'ings ain't fo' black folks to know." Leila's quick eyes noticed the old mammy's change of expression, and she decided to probe further.

"But those girls who are always coming here . . . those Fletchers . . . *they* know something, don't they?" she asked.

"Well, if dey does, *Ah* ain't know anyt'ing 'bout it. Dey ain't nebber tell old Missouri." And from this position the ancient colored woman could not be budged. So Leila, who was now becoming rather worried about keeping the car out so long, knowing that her father might be wanting it at any minute, decided that it was useless to pursue the quest any longer, and abruptly took her leave.

She was about half-way back to Burton and going at a rattling pace along the narrow white road, when the car suddenly went dead, coughed dismally a couple of times, and stood, an imposing but inert mass, in the center of the road. Leila uttered a despairing groan, flung back the door, and got out to inspect the motor. She had indeed learned to drive, skilfully if somewhat recklessly, but of the workings of the machine

she had not the most rudimentary notion and had always firmly refused to learn.

Opening the hood, she began to prod, ignorantly but hopefully, at the complicated mass of coils and screws, but could make nothing of the puzzle. So she finally sat down by the side of the road to wait for the first motorist who should come that way. She was quaking inwardly at the thought that even now her father might be tramping up and down at the Fletchers', demanding what had become of his daughter and his car. And no motorist appeared from any direction.

When hope of rescue had all but died, and she was considering the feasibility of walking back and leaving the car to its fate, she was suddenly electrified by the sight of a familiar figure tramping down the road. And shrieking, "Ronny! Ronny! oh, *Ronny!*" she rushed at him and threw herself, sobbing hysterically, against his protesting shoulder.

"What the Harry is the matter, and where have you been with that car?" he demanded irritably. "Dad'll be wild if he knows you took it out. I bet you didn't ask him."

"Oh, no! I didn't! I didn't! And I'm scared stiff, Ronny!" wailed his tearful sister. "I took it for a little spin" (she carefully refrained from mentioning her destination), "and . . . and she suddenly went dead on me . . . and I don't know what to do. I guess I've broken something."

Ronny gave a disgusted snort and went over to inspect the motor, the hood of which was still up. Then he went around to the back of the car, unscrewed the cap of the gasoline-tank, and gazed at the indicator.

"Just as I thought!" he remarked in tones of withering scorn. "Gas all out, and you never even bothered to turn on the reserve three gallons! Ain't that just like a *girl!*"

"I . . . I didn't know there was any reserve," sniffled Leila.

"Aw . . . get in and I'll drive you back. And for Pete's sake, *learn* a little about this car before you try to drive it again!" scolded her brother, climbing into the driver's seat.

But before they had quite reached the town, he turned to her again, inquiring suspiciously:

"Where you been with the car this morning,

anyhow? Something queer about you sneaking off like that."

"That's my own affair!" retorted Miss Leila Speer, stiffly, nor would she vouchsafe an explanation. But Ronny had made a mental note of her reticence, and promised himself to investigate the matter.

CHAPTER III

THE SUN-DIAL

IN the few days that had passed since the coming of the Speers, many things had happened. Naomi and Enid discussed them as they leaned over the rail of the narrow little footbridge across Fletcher's Cove, the following Saturday morning. They were on their way to the village to get the morning mail and do the week-end errands for the household, and they had stopped to stare down into the swirling brown water of the incoming tide while they reviewed the unusual events of the week.

"Who'd have thought last Saturday," mused Enid, shying a chip over the rail, "that anything so strange and . . . and unpleasant could happen . . . in seven days! What do you think of those two young Speers staying on with us, Naomi?"

"The boy's all right; he is an interesting

youngster. But I can't understand the girl."

"I detest her!" cried Enid. "And it's easy to see she despises us."

"I'm sorry for her . . . for them both," replied Naomi. "The boy's a good little sort, but he's awfully delicate. You can see his father just worships him; he's the apple of that man's eye. The girl could be real pleasant . . . if she tried . . . and she has pretty eyes. But she's so pleased with herself, so conceited, and . . . and busy looking down on those who haven't as much money as the Speers, that she hasn't time to be agreeable. And she's missing a whole lot of fun in life. Sometimes I think she half suspects it!"

"I don't think she liked it very much when her father proposed to Grandma that she keep Leila and Ronny here to board while he got things settled up about the Pettigrew place," said Enid. "Leila told me she had wanted to spend the time in a hotel in Savannah so she could shop and go to the movies and all that. She was downright *mad!*"

"I know she was mad," agreed Naomi. "I heard her arguing it all out with her father, and he told her the outdoor life here was fine for

Ronny and the food was good and wholesome and he liked Grandma and us. She said things were like camping out, here, after what they'd been used to, and she couldn't stand the hardship. And he just laughed and said it would do her good and that's all there was about it and she was to quit scolding and just see that Ronny didn't take cold and kept out in the sun. She's hardly spoken to any one since."

"I don't mind their being here so much; it's kind of interesting," sighed Enid, "but I . . . I just can't bear to think of what he's going to do to Pettigrew's Folly. I . . . I can't sleep nights, thinking about it. What will our life be . . . without that place? And then, too, there's the other thing about it—"

"Yes, I know," Naomi hastily interrupted. "I'm worried almost sick over it, too. Perhaps if he understood— But what's the use? He probably wouldn't. You can't explain things like that to a . . . a Shoe King!"

"Whoo-ee!" called a voice from to top of the rise that sloped down to the foot-bridge. And, looking up, they beheld the Shoe King's son, in golf knickers and a flannel shirt, waving to

them amiably and signifying a wish to join them.

"Come on!" they called back in response and he ran down the bluff and across the bridge, puffing and gasping.

"Gee! but I wish I didn't get so out of breath!" he wheezed. "It's the asthma. Dad says it'll be good for that . . . here. Hope he's right. Say, I gotta favor to ask of you girls. I'm sick and tired of hanging around with that sister of mine. She's one awful grouch, 'specially right now. Acts like a wounded bear 'cause Dad won't let us go and hang out in Savannah at some stuffy old hotel and go to the movies all day long. She says I'm the cause of it all, and I'm just about fed up on her working her grouch off on me.

"What I want to know is, will you folks let me hang around with you once in a while?" he went on. "I'm so dead lonesome, 'specially when you go trotting off on those ponies. And is there any place around here where I can hire or buy one for myself? Dad'll stand for it; the doctor said last year riding would be fine for me, and I learned then." He hung over the rail

while he made this speech and at the end gazed up into their faces in so comically appealing a manner that their hearts were won on the instant.

"I 'clare, we'd just enjoy having you go round with us," cried Naomi, heartily, "but I don't know where we could find another pony. There's not another one in the town. These were sent down to us by a friend of Grandma's who lives in New Jersey. He spent part of a winter here, two years ago, and sent us down these ponies after he went back. They had belonged to his children, who are grown up now and going to college, so they don't use them any more. That's how we got them."

"Tell you what!" cried Enid, inspired with a sudden idea. "There's that old white mare of Mr. Tripp's. She's a funny-looking old thing and spends most of her time eating her head off in the pasture. But she'll *go!* I know it, 'cause I used to ride her before the ponies came. And Mr. Tripp has an old saddle, too. Let's go and see him about it right now. And if he's willing to hire her out, I'll ride her because I'm used to her, and Ronny can ride Beauty."

" 'Deed you won't!" exclaimed Ronny. "I'm

equal to any old white mare on four legs! Come on and let's make the dicker with Mr. Tripp!"

That very afternoon the two girls on their ponies and Ronny on the white mare—a raw-boned, hammer-headed piece of horse-flesh which Ronny had promptly christened "Hannah"—started off for a ride. Leila Speer, seated on the porch with a depleted box of bonbons beside her, watched them go, and with a scornful sniff turned back to her movie magazine, to face a lonely afternoon.

"Where would you like to go?" asked Naomi, politely, as they cantered off down the lane and were about to turn into the public highway. "It's a pleasant ride out to Berkley Ferry or over on the Hardeeville road."

"If you don't mind," replied Ronny, bouncing up and down rather breathlessly on Hannah's bony spine, "I'd like to ride over to that place Dad's aiming to buy. We traveled all over this region in the car, and I like that best of all. And, say, d'you mind going slow . . . till I get used to the paces of this nag?"

While they walked their animals along the white road through the pine barrens, the girls learned that Ronny's mother had died when he

was a baby and that a sister of his father's had helped take care of the two children; that Ronny had never been very strong, and that the Shoe King had come South to find a climate that would agree with the boy and hoped great things from the present healthful surroundings. Ronny, on the other hand, learned that the two girls, though of South-Carolina parentage, had been born in Philadelphia and had lived there till a few years before, as their father's business had been located there. Since then business had taken him abroad for the greater part of each year. And as this past year their mother had elected to accompany him, they were staying with their grandmother in the little coast town of Burton and immensely enjoying the experience. This brought Ronny to another matter, which had evidently been on his mind.

"There's a lot of questions I've been wanting to ask about this old Pettigrew place," he said, as they turned into the beautiful but unkempt old driveway under the trailing strands of Spanish moss. "You said, that time we were here before, that it belonged to somebody connected with you and had a queer history. But Dad came up before you got a chance to tell me about

it and I saw the queerest look on both your faces when he said he was going to buy it. Now, I somehow got a hunch that there's a lot about this place you know and most other folks don't. D'you mind telling a little bit of it to me? I'm so plumb curious about it I could hardly wait to ask. But you needn't say a thing if you don't want to." This he added as he caught a fleeting glance of surprise and indecision that passed between the two girls. It was Enid who constituted herself the spokesman.

"It's easy to see you're a pretty observant person," she commented admiringly. "There evidently isn't much that gets by without your noticing it. Yes, Naomi and I were upset the other day, especially when your father said he was going to tear down this house. There's a . . . well . . . a very special reason why that would be an awful pity. Nobody knows about it, around here, but ourselves, and we found it out quite by accident. Coosaw could tell us a little bit, because he was a slave here before the war, of course. But he didn't know the real ins and outs of it—nobody does as far as we can see. But a queer thing happened at this house once, and until the mystery is cleared up and . . .

and something is found . . . it oughtn't to be sold or . . . or be torn down, anyway."

They stopped the ponies short at the foot of the steps and Ronny threw his leg over the white mare's back and slid to the ground to help the others dismount. His eyes were snapping and his manner almost comically earnest.

"Will you tell me about it?" he demanded. "I've got a terrific pull with Dad. Perhaps I can do something. He's buying this place for my benefit, anyhow. Let me in on the big idea, won't you?"

Again the girls took counsel together, with their eyes, and Naomi voiced their unspoken agreement:

"I reckon we'd better do it, though Enid and I had promised each other we'd never tell about it; it seemed such fun to have it for a secret. And we couldn't have a better place to tell you than right here, where it all happened. Come along with us and we'll show you all about it."

They turned the ponies loose to graze in a pasture and went around to the back of the mansion, to the cabin of old Coosaw and Missouri, who had once been slaves on the estate and for many years past had been the unofficial care-

takers of the deserted place. Their cabin was the nearest of the number that once constituted the slave quarters, others being inhabited by their numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Naomi got the key from Coosaw and the three went around to the front and swung open the great double doors to let in the sunlight and air.

"Gee!" exclaimed Ronny, in a subdued voice, "this hall is *great,* ain't it!—two stories high, that way, with the rooms opening on a gallery round the second floor, and the stairs curving around three sides like that. It takes your breath away. And look at all the beautiful carved woodwork. It'd be a crime to pull it down."

"Yes, it's lovely," replied Naomi, absently, "but come with us now, and we'll show you something that will surprise you." She led the way up the winding, decrepit old staircase to the second floor, walked part-way around the balcony on which opened a number of large bedrooms, and entered a door directly at the back that led through a passage into the rear portion of the house. Here the construction was markedly different from that of the front.

"This is the old tabby part of the house,"

explained Enid. "You see, it's made of entirely different material—a mixture of lime and oyster-shells that they used to call 'tabby'—and the walls are very thick. This part was built 'way back soon after the Revolution. Come this way."

They led Ronny into a great bare, low-ceilinged room, containing nothing but a stone fireplace which occupied a large space at one side. Naomi drew him over to the fireplace, then took one of his fingers and laid the tip in an inconspicuous crack between two of the stones.

"Press there," she said, "and see what happens."

Ronny did as she had directed, and, to his intense astonishment, a portion of the wooden wainscoting near the chimney turned inward, as on a pivot, and revealed a narrow, shoulder-high passageway.

"Now, duck your head and crawl in!" Naomi commanded, climbing through the opening. Followed by Enid, she led the way through the passage and into a room beyond, scarcely bigger than a large closet. There was no real window in the room—only a long, narrow horizontal slit up toward the ceiling, that let in a little daylight. The room contained nothing

save a great nail-studded iron-bound chest that stood in the center of the floor space.

Ronny stood upright and looked about him curiously, then pursed his lips in a low whistle.

"Suffering Simpson! what you got here, anyway?" he queried at last, turning expectantly to the girls, who stood silent, watching his astonishment.

"I thought it would interest you," smiled Naomi. "This is something we discovered ourselves, quite by accident, a long time ago,—several years, I reckon,—because, you know, we used to come down from Philadelphia and visit Grandma for months every year, before we came to stay with her as long as we are staying now. We've had this secret all that time. We were always fond of acting out things we'd learned in history and things from Shakspere's plays that Daddy often read to us. One day we were playing, in that room outside, that we were the two poor little English princes shut up in the Tower of London, and we pretended we were trying to find a way to make our escape. I was feeling along the wall around the fireplace, and crying, 'Oh, let us out! Let us out! We starve and die here!' All of a sudden my finger

touched something right in the crack, and that panel began to slide open with a sort of squeaky sound."

"We were downright scared for a minute or two," said Enid, "and pretty nearly decided to run away and leave it, but we were too curious to do that. We waited around to see if anything else would happen. And then, as nothing did, we screwed up our courage and crawled in here and found this, just as you see it now."

"But what's in that old chest?" demanded Ronny. "Is it locked?"

For answer, Naomi walked over to the chest, threw back the massive lid, and beckoned Ronny to come and look in.

CHAPTER IV

A RECORD OF THE PAST

WHEN Ronny had tiptoed over to the chest and glanced into it, he turned to the girls with a look of disgust and disappointment on his pale, expressive little face.

"Golly! Is that all there is in it?—a lot of old books? I thought there'd be pirate treasure, or all the family plate, or something like that. What's there queer about old books?"

Enid laughed.

"I knew you'd be disappointed," she said, "but it doesn't do to judge too quickly. That's just what *we* thought till we'd explored a little more. It *is* full of old books and old papers and family documents and records. The books are mostly old law-books and reports belonging to the original old Judge Cotesworth, and we looked all through them and there's nothing interesting about them, at all. There's just one book that has the least thing in it that would

make any one think there was something mysterious about it, and it's *this* one."

She reached in and lifted out a massive old volume lying on the top of the pile of books and placed it in Ronny's hands. It was a huge old family Bible, profusely illustrated with curious pictures and divided in the center by a number of pages bare of printing, such as were always provided for records of births, marriages, and deaths, often for several generations.

Ronny turned the pages of the old volume wonderingly and announced at last that he'd like to know more about it. He begged the girls to explain.

"To make you understand," said Naomi, "we'll have to tell you a little about the family, I reckon. . . . You see, old Judge Hannibal Cotesworth, who originally built this mansion, was the uncle—or, at least, his wife was the aunt—of the Mrs. Pettigrew who lived here before and during the war. Her husband, Harvey Pettigrew, was rebuilding the house for her and hadn't quite finished it when the war broke out and he went away and was killed the second year.

"They say every one in Burton fled from the

town when the war began. They were ordered to, and it wasn't safe to stay because Sherman's army marched into it and took possession of everything at once. But Mrs. Pettigrew declared she wasn't going to leave her beautiful home. She had plenty of slaves on the place and as a company of Union soldiers came galloping up the avenue, she stood right out on the front-veranda steps. Sherman wasn't there, himself, but she told the commanding officer that she wanted a message carried to him. She said she had known Sherman well when he was an officer at West Point, and danced with him many times when she was visiting in the North and he had once even asked her to marry him. She wanted to know if he proposed to wreck her home now after having been such a friend.

"Sherman sent back word that she and her home would be perfectly safe and that she might stay in it as long as she pleased, but that he would be obliged to quarter some of his officers there. She did stay for several months, with the house servants and her little son, but at last she decided to go away and join some friends who had taken refuge in Virginia. Sherman allowed her a safe-conduct and she went

away, leaving the house just as it was, in the care of the Union soldiers.

"They say she never came back to it. Sherman's army was removed later and some other detachment came to take its place. In the confusion of changing, the newer soldiers were not given orders about sparing the place and they wrecked and burned the furniture, and once came near burning down the house itself, through carelessness. It was only Coosaw's promptness in putting out the fire that saved the place. He and Missouri had been left here by Mrs. Pettigrew to sort of look after things, and they've stayed here ever since. But he couldn't save the furniture and the rugs and portraits and things when the soldiers took a notion to use them for fuel.

"Well, after it was all over, Mrs. Pettigrew decided to stay up in Virginia with her friends. She said she never wanted to see the place again, after it had been so injured. She lived in Virginia for a number of years and then went down to St. Augustine, Florida, with her son, who was always rather delicate and had to go there for his health. She died there after a while, but the son has lived on there ever since, and of

course it's he who owns this place. That's the history of Pettigrew's Folly, as far as we know it."

Ronny had been drinking it all in eagerly. Now he burst out:

"Yes, but that doesn't explain anything about this room and this old trunk and the books. And what about the queer thing you said you saw?—something about that old Bible."

"I'm coming to that," went on Naomi. "Of course, you know, we've never told any one about finding this hidden room and the things in it. Whatever the explanation about them is, we've had to figure out for ourselves, and we've no idea whether it's right or not. Coosaw told us that Mrs. Pettigrew took with her all the family silver and jewelry and important papers when she went away. He knows, for he helped her pack them secretly, so it shouldn't be known she was carrying anything of value away. But we think she may have known about this hiding-place and left this trunk full of books and old documents here where they would be perfectly safe unless the house burned down. Now we're going to show you what we think is so strange in this old Bible."

She opened the huge volume to one of the unprinted pages in the middle, took out a slip of paper, and pointed to a strange design drawn on it in faded brown ink. There were two drawings, rather crudely outlined, and at first glance, in the dim light of the little room, it was difficult to distinguish what either could be meant to represent. Ronny squinted at the page for several concentrated moments, then declared:

"I don't get this at all. . . . Just about as clear as mud to me! . . . What's this gate-post with a soup-plate on top with the spoon sticking in it, anyhow?"

The girls couldn't suppress a giggle at his ludicrous description.

"I don't blame you for not knowing what it is," said Enid. "We didn't either when we first saw it. We had to study it a long time before we made it out. It's supposed to be the drawing of a *sun-dial.* You've seen sun-dials, haven't you?"

"Never had so much as a bowing-acquaintance with one," admitted Ronny, candidly, "except the busted old thing out on the lawn, down yonder. What are they for, anyhow?"

"Why, to tell time by," Naomi explained.

"They were the old-time means of telling it before people had so many clocks and watches. And, then, people used to have them in their gardens as ornaments, too—in fact, still do, according to a book about them that I found in the Savannah Library. There must have been something very curious about this sun-dial. We're sure these are drawings of that old one down on the lawn, because the lower part seems like it—that fluted column and the square base. Of course the upper part of that is missing, but this is evidently what it looks like . . . or looked like once. But this other drawing must be the face of the dial as you look down on it. You see it has the Roman numbers on it, very much like the face of a clock, only in different position, so that the pointer or stylus (I think they call it) can throw the shadow on them as it is cast by the sun."

"But what are all those words around the edge?" demanded Ronny, squinting at the page harder than ever, for the lettering was very tiny and indistinct in the dim light of the little room.

"It's a motto. Most sun-dials seem to have them around the edge or somewhere about

them. The book said that the mottos were usually about how short time is, and how quickly the hours fly, and that sort of thing. A very pretty one and a great favorite was: 'I only count the sunny hours.' But this has a rather curious one. We can't make out exactly what it means, or whether it means anything special. You see it reads: *'My shadow marks the appointed hour. None other doth the secret hold.'* "

"Huh!" declared Ronny, after thinking this over a moment. "That might mean a whole lot of things . . . or nothing at all . . . just as you say. But what's the rest of the writing . . . or whatever it was that puzzled you? Perhaps we could dope something out of that."

"Here it is," answered Naomi, pointing to some scrawled notes on the side of the drawings. "We puzzled all these out with a magnifying-glass that Grandma uses to read with sometimes. The writing is scrawly and indistinct. You can't make it out very easily in this light, but we've read it so often we remember it perfectly. This line right under the drawing says:

" 'Mr. Lyndon of England has insisted on sending me this sun-dial. He has a fancy for

them. Prefers odd and curious ones. He wrote explaining the secret of this one. Advised that I destroy the written description of it and keep the secret to myself. Thinks I might find it useful sometime! A singular man!' "

"So now you see," put in Enid, triumphantly, "that we were right. Do you know who wrote this?"

"Old man Cotesworth, as I figure it," answered Ronny, shrewdly if somewhat irreverently.

"Right!" said Naomi. "It's the same writing as a lot of these entries of births and deaths in the family record in this Bible, and those were all made by old Judge Cotesworth. But here's another scribbled note in the same handwriting, only with a different kind of ink. We think it was written later. It looks fresher, somehow. But he evidently wrote it—beyond a doubt. See what it says." Naomi pointed to another entry off in a corner.

" 'I have confided to Scipio the secret of the dial,' " she read. " 'Times are troubled and unsettled, and it might be well for another to share the secret. Scipio is devoted and faithful. He will guard it with his life.' "

Ronny's response to this entry was to purse his lips in a low whistle and execute a complicated double shuffle on the scant floor-space of the tiny room.

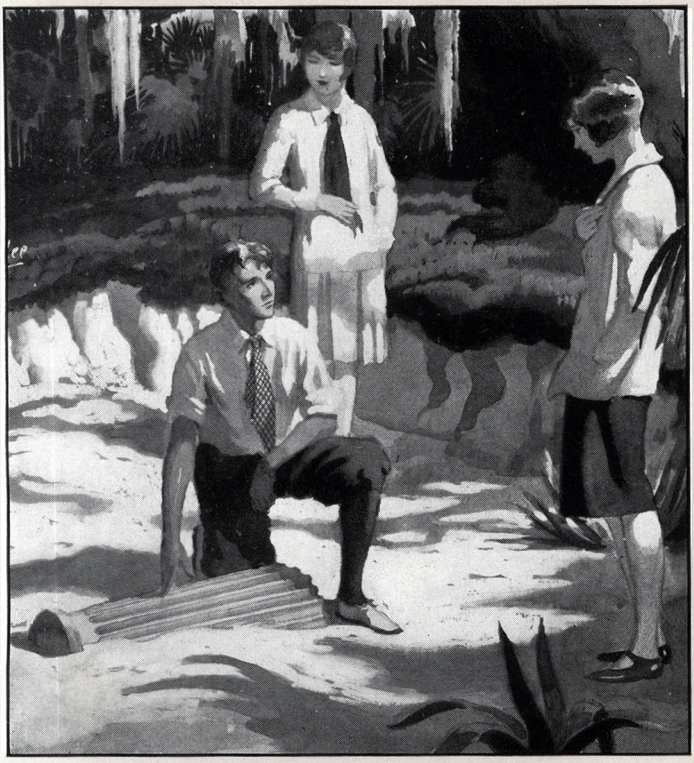
"Hot stuff!" he ejaculated finally, when he had managed to get his asthmatic breath after this exertion. "Right off the bat! Got any more of the same vintage?"

"There are two more entries," explained Naomi, "both very short. Just a line over here, you see, in the same handwriting. All it says is: 'Good old Lyndon did me unwittingly a great service. If it should prove that R—' And there that ends. We can't make out what it all means, though we've made some guesses."

Ronny forbore to comment on this at all, but begged:

"Go on, please! What does the last one say?"

"This is the strangest one of all," continued Naomi. "You see, it's written down at the bottom of the paper and is in entirely different handwriting from the other. You couldn't even mistake it for the same. It reads: 'This is very disturbing. It may alter everything. I must look into it further.' And that is absolutely all!" she ended.



"Suppose we roll it over and see what's underneath"

There was silence in the little room for several moments after Naomi had finished. Then Ronny sprang to his feet with a whoop that set him coughing and exclaimed:

"Lead me out to that sun-dial, instanter!" And he scrambled through the low doorway, followed by the two girls, who first, however, took the precaution to put away the old Bible and close the chest. Naomi swung back the sliding panel after them.

They found Ronny flat on his stomach by the sun-dial, trying to peer under it around the edges, as it lay ignominiously prostrate at the top of the bluff.

"Can't make beans out of this!" he muttered disgustedly, getting up and picking the sand-spurs off his coat. "There ain't a mark on any of these three sides that seems to mean anything. Suppose we could roll it over and see what's underneath?"

The girls shook their heads doubtfully.

"We've tried *that,* ourselves," Enid told him, "and we couldn't budge it an inch. You see, it's very heavy marble and it has sort of sunk into the sand in all the years it's been lying so."

"I think we'd better be getting back home,"

remarked Naomi at this point, catching a glimpse of Ronny's wrist-watch. "It's after five, and Grandma wanted us to do those errands in town on the way."

Rather regretfully the trio returned the key of the mansion to old Coosaw and went to hunt up the ponies and Hannah, who had strayed far afield in their grazing. The three young people were rather quiet on the ride back through the pine barrens. Ronny was fully occupied in keeping his seat on Hannah, whose gait was as much up and down as forward. The girls suspected that he was also mulling over the events of the afternoon in his clever little brain, before commenting on them largely. They had some time since discovered this was a way he had. They had stopped a moment to let their mounts drink from a clear brown runlet by the roadside when he suddenly burst out:

"Say, I gotta hunch you girls ain't let me in on the whole of this dial business yet, have you? Strikes me there's a lot of blank spaces you were going to fill in . . . and didn't!"

"Well, you didn't give us a chance," explained Enid. "We were fixing to when you cut

loose and rushed out to see the dial. And then it was getting so late—"

"You win! I *did* make a break," he admitted. "But, say, let's have another session on this, first chance we get. And, for Pete's sake don't let that lemon of a Leila in on it! She'd spoil everything."

And as they turned in at the head of the village street, the girls agreed that the secret should be shared with no one else.

CHAPTER V

LEILA PRESENTS SOME DIFFICULTIES

IT was obvious, that evening, that Miss Leila Speer, the Shoe King's daughter, was still in anything but an amiable humor, and that not a little envy and suspicion was added to her other dissatisfactions. She was still on the veranda when the trio returned from their expedition and was gloomily regarding a letter lying in her lap.

"What's that?" demanded Ronny, eying it with interest. "Something from Dad?"

"Yes, and he's gone back to Bridgeport," she snapped. "Started last night. Some sudden business, awfully important, called him away. Says we're to stay right here in Burton till he gets back. He may be a week or even more. Says we're not to budge out of Burton till he comes. Can't go to Savannah . . . or anything. . . . Isn't it a crime! I'll die in this hole!"

"Doesn't worry yours truly one little bit!" replied Ronny, airily. "I got other things to occupy my mind besides gnawing candy and browsing over an old movie magazine all day."

"Where've you been all the afternoon, anyway?" she demanded with sudden suspicion. "And where'd you get that awful nag I saw you straddling? I'd be ashamed to ride such a looking creature."

"I know you would," agreed Ronny, "and that's just where you and I differ. Hannah's all right. She gets me there and back, and that's the main thing. I suppose I ain't so particular about appearances as I ought to be. Better take some lessons from you, I reckon!" And he was walking off with an assumed air of injured dignity, when Leila stopped him.

"Here!" she called. "You haven't told me yet where you've been all afternoon. I promised Dad I'd look after you, and I'm not going to have you straying around unless I know where you are."

"Huh! Precious lot *you* care unless you think it's something more interesting than what you've got on hand!" snorted Ronny. "If you must know, I went over to inspect our new win-

fer home, miss. And now I hope your satisfied."

"Well, I don't see why you had to take those two girls along, if you did. I don't see why they're always hanging about that place, anyhow. Seems to me they're on the spot every time we go there. It's our place now, and they ought to keep off it."

At this point, Ronny turned a beet red with indignation.

"Those girls are a lot better sports than you are, Miss Highty-Tighty!" he exploded. "And what's more, the place ain't ours yet; Dad hasn't closed the deal, and you know it. They've played around there all their lives, and they've just as much right to be there as we have. So cut out all this high-and-mighty stuff, if you please!" And he turned away to go into the house. But his sister was to have the last word.

"All right!" she called after him. "But the next time you go out riding, young man, I'm going along. Understand?"

Ronny deigned no reply to this declaration and shut himself in his room, leaving his sister with all the honors of the affray. But once alone he jammed his hands into his pockets and muttered: "So you think you're going to tag

along after us, eh! Pleasant prospect for us! but I guess we can fix up a nice little excursion for *you,* all right!" After which dark threat, he washed his hands and brushed his hair and sallied out to do ample justice to Grandma Fletcher's supper.

From that moment a spirit of maddening perversity appeared to have entered into Miss Leila Speer. She had scented the fact that Ronny enjoyed the company of these two new friends—more, that the three of them even seemed to share some interesting mystery or secret from which she was shut out. And a jealous determination to thwart their plans or discover their secret prompted her to force herself upon them as insistently as she had withdrawn from them heretofore.

After supper, as they were all sitting about the fireplace in the hall, which was used as a living-room, and Leila was languidly discussing with Grandma Fletcher the disadvantages of having no moving-picture house in town, Ronny proposed to the girls that they go outside and sit on the bench at the edge of the bluff and watch the moonlight on the river. In ordinary circumstances this proposal would have had no

attraction for Leila, and he wanted to hear from Naomi and Enid what they had not yet told him concerning the Pettigrew's Folly mystery. But to his immense disgust, Leila piped up:

"Oh, yes, do let's! It's gorgeous moonlight to-night!" And went to her room to get a wrap.

"Golly!" Ronny muttered angrily to Naomi. "What's got her *now,* anyway? I see where we ain't going to have a minute to ourselves to talk things over, if she's going to hang on to us like that."

"Never mind," whispered Naomi. "I know what you wanted to talk about, but we'll have to put it off till to-morrow afternoon. After school we'll ride out with you again to Pettigrew's. I don't believe she'll care to go, and she hasn't any mount, anyhow. And then we'll tell you."

Somewhat cheered by this prospect, Ronny endured his sister's unwelcome company as they sat on a bench near the edge of the bluff, under an immense old live-oak draped eerily with long streamers of Spanish moss, and watched the sheeted silver of the river, moving languidly among the marsh islands. Their talk was mainly of a possum that had been making

nightly raids on Grandma Fletcher's chicken-yard of late. Thoroughly bored at last, and chilled by a night wind that had risen, Leila yawned and declared she was going indoors and to bed, and she got up and strolled to the house. The others, though none too warm themselves, protested that they were entirely comfortable and, secretly rejoicing, remained where they were.

"Now's our chance!" exulted Ronny, when his sister had disappeared. "I'm warm enough, if you folks are. Tell me what you didn't get a chance to this afternoon."

"All right," agreed Naomi, looking out over the moonlit river. "I reckon we've got our chance at last. What we didn't tell you is about some conversations we had with Grandma Fletcher and with Coosaw, after we'd first made the discoveries in the old attic. We wanted to find out if Coosaw and Grandma knew anything about that sun-dial and what had happened to it. And also if Grandma knew—"

But at this point, a window of the house was heard to open and the voice of Leila Speer floated penetratingly to where they sat:

"Ronny! Ron-ny! You come straight in here,

out of that chilly wind. Do you want to bring on another attack of asthma? I think you must be crazy. I'm going to write to Dad if you don't mind me this minute!"

Ronny uttered a baffled groan.

"Gee! Aren't big sisters simply the limit? But I s'pose I gotta go. She's got the goods on me, I'll have to admit, for I'm getting hoarse this minute. And the worst of it is that she told me she was going with us the next time we took a ride. Can you beat it?"

"Oh, perhaps she won't want to when the time comes," comforted Enid, hopefully. "Anyway, she hasn't any horse, and there's nothing more to borrow for her except old Balaam, the mule. She can have Beauty, though, and I'll stay home," she ended generously.

"You bet she won't!" cried the exasperated Ronny. "I'll never stand for that. She'll ride old Hannah, and I'd give my eye-teeth to see her doing it, too!" The mental picture entertained the trio for a moment, but they returned indoors rather depressed by the prospect for the morrow.

The following day, however, Fate was kinder to them than they had dared to hope, for in the

afternoon it was discovered that Miss Leila Speer was suffering from a violent sick headache and had retired to bed. Enid and Naomi both offered to sit with her and read or divert her in some fashion, but Grandma Fletcher declared that she herself was quite capable of doing anything necessary for the temporary invalid, and that all Leila needed was rest and sleep. So, with clear consciences and striving to repress undue jubilation, the trio set out for Pettigrew's Folly.

"We'd better make the most of our time," advised Ronny. "No telling when we'll get another day to ourselves when Miss Grouch recovers! Fire away, girls! Tell me all you know while we're getting there, and we can go into it more thoroughly when we're on the spot."

And so, as they jogged along the white road through the pine barrens, Naomi resumed the interrupted tale:

"After we'd discovered that queer paper in the old Bible," she began, "of course we were very much puzzled. It struck us both right away that there was something very strange about it all, but at first we didn't dream it was anything but some old past-and-gone affair that

some one had left some scrappy notes about and forgotten long ago. We didn't know then who had made them, nor even that they were about that old broken dial by the river. It was rather late in the afternoon, the day we discovered the drawings, and we just put the paper back into the trunk and hurried home, deciding to go over it more carefully some other time.

"It was Enid's idea to make it our business to solve the mystery about it, if we possibly could," Naomi continued. "She's always been crazy about working out riddles and puzzles, and adores mystery and detective stories, too. She woke me out of a sound sleep in the middle of that very next night by shaking me and declaring she'd made up her mind to work this puzzle out and that I had to help her. And she made me promise I'd keep the secret to myself and not go talking about it all over, for that would spoil all the fun. And, besides, if we told any one about the secret room and the trunk of books, we might be forbidden to go and play there any more or something like that. You see, the rest of the house is empty of furniture and so there's no harm in our being in and out of it as it stands. Grandma has always thought it per-

fectly all right for us to go there, especially with faithful old Coosaw and Missouri to look after us.

"Well," she concluded, "the next day we went back, got the paper out, and studied it carefully. It was Enid who suddenly discovered that the drawing was a picture of the old wrecked sun-dial outside. I tell you, that gave us a thrill, because we'd always wondered about the old thing and what had happened to it and where the missing part of it could be. Then Enid declared the next thing for us to do was to find out who'd made all those scribblings around the sides of the paper."

"But I thought you said you knew it was in the old judge's handwriting," interrupted Ronny.

"We didn't know it at the time," Naomi explained. "We didn't know these were all his books . . . or anything about it. We decided that we'd better go through everything else in the chest, and we did. And an awful job it was —took us nearly a week of steady work. But we found that they were all just as we've said, old law-books and things belonging to the judge. Every one of them had his name in it,—

Hannibal T. Cotesworth,—so we couldn't make a mistake. And the next thing that struck us was that the handwriting of the name and some notes written on fly-leaves and margins was exactly the same as the notes around the dial drawings—all except that one at the bottom, which we knew must be some one else's. So it was plain as plain that the old judge had made the drawings and written the notes—all but that one."

Here Ronny interrupted again:

"Well, but who made that one?"

"That," said Naomi, "is something we haven't found out yet. After we'd dug out all we could find, from the things in the chest, we decided to talk to Coosaw and Missouri and question them in such a way as not to let them know what we were really driving at, and find out what they knew. Coosaw was born on the place and so of course he was here, as a boy, when the old judge was alive. He had often told us so. We thought he would know who this Scipio was that it mentioned. We knew it must have been one of the slaves. So we got him to talk about old times one day and then asked him

if he'd ever known a Scipio among the colored people here.

"And then you'd better believe that we jumped when he said: 'Lawsy, missy, dat mah old pappy!' We found that Scipio had been the judge's personal servant, went with him everywhere, knew all the family secrets as well as his master, and was trusted with everything, even the judge's money and valuables, often, when his master didn't want to be bothered with them. Then we asked Coosaw what had happened to Scipio, finally, and he told us that the old judge and his faithful servant were injured at the same time. The judge had been to Beaufort and was driving home late one night with Scipio managing the horses. They were overtaken by a terrific thunder-storm as they were crossing a bridge. The horses took fright from the violent thunder and lightning and ran away, and the carriage was overturned on the bridge and dashed over the side. The old judge only lived two or three days after, and Scipio died four or five months later."

"Then," commented Ronny, soberly, "the only ones who knew the secret were both dead."

"Exactly," said Naomi. "After that we led Coosaw by roundabout ways to the subject of the sun-dial. He remembered it standing in its place in the center of the beautiful lawn when he was a small child. It had been placed there some years before he was born. After the old judge died it still stood there. The judge had left Cotesworth Hall, as it was really called, to his wife, whose unmarried name had been Harriet Stepney. Miss Harriet didn't live more than a year or two longer than her husband, and when she died she left it to her brother, Winfield Stepney. He lived in another part of the State and never occupied the house, but gave it to his daughter, Lucilla, when she was married to Harvey Pettigrew. The slaves of course had gone with the place. By this time, Coosaw was fully grown and was the property of Miss Lucill', as he calls her. And he says she trusted him as much as the old judge had trusted his father.

"But to come back to the sun-dial. We asked Coosaw if he knew what had happened to it and how it came to be all to pieces that way. He looked so queer the minute we asked him! First he said:

" 'No, missy, I ain't know. Jest got dat way somehow, one night.' Then he added, as if it were an afterthought, 'Maybe Yankees smash um.'

"But I could see he was holding something back. So I looked him right in the eye and said:

" 'Coosaw, you really know about it, don't you?'

"And he shuffled and fidgeted and finally he said:

" 'Yassum, missy. Ah right sho' knows, but Ah ain't fo' tell. Miss Lucill' she done mek me promise. Ah ain't nebber tell no one, not even Missouri.'

"We knew we couldn't get any more out of him, so we gave it up. But it set us thinking pretty hard. We asked him one more question, however, and it was whether he'd ever heard of any secret rooms or passages in the old house. We had understood that a good many of the old houses had them and wondered if this one did. We wanted to see if he knew about this one. He said:

" 'Sho' dey is, but Ah ain't know whar 'tis. Old Marse Hannibal knowed, an' Scipio, but dey ain't tell. Miss Lucill' she know too. But

Ah dunno how she found it out. She done told me once she found um an' she say she show me whar 'tis, bimeby. But she go away fust an' nebber come back. So Ah dunno.' "

"Golly!" murmured Ronny. "There certainly is something shady there! Wish we could put old Coosaw through the third degree. But, anyhow, go on, girls! Anything more? This sure is getting thicker and thicker."

"Yes," went on Naomi, "there *is* something more—the most curious thing of all. After we thought we'd learned all that Coosaw was willing to tell us, we got Grandma talking one night about the old place. We've always noticed that she has acted rather queer and silent when we've tried to question her about Pettigrew's Folly, and never could quite understand why. That particular night we just asked her right out and this is what she said:

" 'Pettigrew's Folly has always been a rather sore subject in our family.' We couldn't understand what she meant, for we'd never known it had anything much to do with our family, though it had once belonged to a relative. And when we asked her what she meant, she said: 'You children were born and brought

up in the North, and you don't know as much about your forebears as you ought to. Old Judge Cotesworth was my own grandfather. And he left Cotesworth Hall plantation to his second wife instead of to his only son, and nobody ever knew why."

"Whew-ee!" exclaimed Ronny, in a long whistle. "*Now* you're talking! I begin to see method in our madness!"

CHAPTER VI

LEILA IMPROVES AN AFTERNOON

WHEN the trio had departed that afternoon on their ponies and Hannah, they left Miss Leila Speer in bed in a darkened room, and ministered to at intervals by a concerned Grandma Fletcher, with aromatic spirits of ammonia and smelling-salts. Inactivity and a prolonged diet of chocolates had done their work, and the afflicted young lady found herself suffering with a violent sick headache of the most humiliating type.

She lay with a bay-rum-moistened bandage about her head, the shades of the long French windows drawn down, and in the cool darkness of the room tried to forget the stabbing pains in her temples and the even more appalling qualms in her interior, by speculating on whatever it could be that Ronny and those two girls found to talk about eternally . . . and why

they always stopped or turned the conversation to something else when she came near them . . . and where they could have galloped off to that afternoon.

It was certainly hard luck that just at this particular moment she should be laid low by an outrageous headache of this type. She did not stop to reflect that it was a type to which she was particularly subject, nor that she knew all too well the cause of them. When they were over, she always returned to the candy-box with undiminished ardor, and reasoning with her on the subject had never had the least effect.

She was angrily certain that Ronny and the girls had gone off again to Pettigrew's Folly, and a desperate determination to discover what took them there grew in her, even as she sniffed the smelling-salts and clutched at her throbbing temples. It was cruel of Ronny, anyway, to shut her out in this fashion when he knew she hadn't a living thing to interest her in this awful town. She'd tell their father the minute he came back from Bridgeport, and *he'd* see that Ronny behaved himself and included her in his expeditions! But even as she formulated this thought, she knew she would never do anything

of the sort. The Shoe King took little or no interest in his children's quarrels, and almost invariably sided with Ronny when he permitted a discussion of their differences at all.

At this point, Grandma Fletcher tiptoed into the room with another dose of aromatic spirits, and when she had turned over and smoothed Leila's rumpled pillow, sat down in the rocking-chair by the bed and took out some crotcheting from a work-bag.

"Thought you might be lonesome and like a little company, honey. Kind of dreary—being sick all by yourself. I won't talk, so don't worry about me. I'll just sit here and hand you your medicine once in a while."

The soothing old voice with its delightful Southern drawl was like balm to Leila's quivering nerves. She only gave Grandma's fingers a grateful pressure, but she lay and watched the pretty crinkly white hair and the bright blue eyes and fine aristocratic features of the elderly Southern lady, and speculated on why she lived in this out-of-the-way corner of the world and took boarders and endured all the discomforts of an impossible little town.

Also she wondered if old Mrs. Fletcher knew

that her grandchildren spent so much time at Pettigrew's or had any idea what they were doing there or what interest they took in the place. Perhaps here was a source of information. Regardless of her throbbing head, Leila suddenly determined to ask some questions.

"I wonder where Ronny and the girls have gone," she began diplomatically, hoping her companion would rise to the bait.

"I don't know, I'm sure, honey. I reckon they've just trotted down the road a piece. Now, don't you try to talk or your head'll hurt more." Thus Grandma Fletcher, with the kindest intention in the world, tried to discourage conversation. But Leila refused to be silent.

"It *doesn't* hurt my head, and I *do* want to talk!" she declared irritably. And, perceiving she was so bent upon having her own way, Grandma Fletcher presently made the excuse that she had something in the oven that needed attention, and tiptoed out of the room. But her absence only strengthened Leila's determination to probe to the bottom of the mystery. By the time Grandma returned, she was up and standing by the bureau, brushing her bobbed

hair, her knees shaking but her headache in some strange way relieved.

"I'm better," she asserted. "And, if you don't mind, can't we sit on the front porch and talk there? I think the fresh air would do me good."

Delighted at her recovery, Grandma cheerfully agreed, and they went out to sit on the wide screened piazza and watch the river through the veils of Spanish moss. And it was there that Leila began anew her campaign of information-seeking. This time she determined to approach her subject in a more roundabout fashion.

"My father is buying that old Pettigrew place," she began, rocking rhythmically. "I suppose you heard about it."

"Yes," said Grandma Fletcher, also rocking, "he told me the other day. I hope you'll all be very happy there. It's a beautiful spot." There was a peculiar change in Grandma's voice as she spoke of the place—which fact did not escape Leila's alert attention. She continued:

"Yes, Dad's going to tear the old house down, I hope, and build a great big new one. I want it to be one like that villa of Raymond Rathbone's,—the movie actor, you know,—out

in Hollywood. There's a dandy picture of it here in my magazine. I'll show it to you." And she handed Grandma Fletcher the magazine, open at the photograph of a massive and ornate mansion, of a type about as unsuitable, in its architecture, to little Burton as anything that could be imagined.

"I showed it to Dad the other night," Leila rambled on, "and he said it looked pretty good to him, but he'd probably make some changes if he selected that model."

Grandma Fletcher took the magazine and looked at the picture with a curious distress in her eyes. Presently she handed it back.

"It's very handsome," she commented, "and probably would be right comfortable to live in, too. But I sort of feel it would be a pity to put up a house like that in old Burton. It's too . . . too grand and gorgeous. Why couldn't your father leave the house as it stands—it was very well built, good material and all—and just renovate it in the style it is now? People are doing that quite frequently with old places in the South, I hear."

"Pooh!" retorted Leila, contemptuously. "It's too much like a barn. And, anyhow, I don't

see why you should care so much, Mrs. Fletcher, what Dad does with it." The old lady went on crotcheting for several silent minutes. Then she said, quite unexpectedly:

"It will be a blow to the girls—Naomi and Enid—when that old place comes down. They love it, always have. And they've played there all their lives." This was just the opening Leila had been seeking and she seized upon it eagerly.

"What is it that the girls do there, Mrs. Fletcher?" she asked. "They seem to be there a lot of the time, and I can't imagine what they see in it—an old empty house like that! There must be some secret about it . . . or . . . or *something!* Do you know what it can be?"

Grandma Fletcher stared at her in astonishment, then lowered her eyes to her work once more. But a slight flush had crept up from her throat to her cheeks which did not escape the sharp eyes of Miss Leila Speer.

"Most of those old mansions have had a secret of some sort connected with them, I reckon," offered Grandma Fletcher, looping the wool over her needle. "It wouldn't be surprising if that one had, too. But it's very unlikely

that our girls have discovered one. If they *have,* they've never told me." It was quite apparent to Leila that Grandma Fletcher was not saying everything she thought or knew about the matter, and she suddenly determined on a bold move.

"Do *you* know any secret about it, Mrs. Fletcher?" she demanded. "Oh, do please tell me about it, if you do! I'd . . . I'd so like to . . ." She was just going to say she'd like to get ahead of the others, but suddenly realized that this would not sound very well, so changed it. "I'd so like to hear what it is. I'm so bored with everything to-day."

Grandma Fletcher lowered her head to count some stitches. When she raised it again, Leila thought the pretty blue eyes looked as if tears might not be very far from the surface. And when the old lady spoke, she was furnished with the thrill for which she had been hoping all the afternoon.

"There are some things so closely connected with you, and so . . . so painful that you cannot talk about them," Grandma Fletcher murmured, very low. "They . . . they hurt too much." Leila was just about to open her lips in

reply when Grandma Fletcher went on in a burst of confidence:

"I think my own granddaughters would be surprised if they knew what all that . . . the matter connected with that old place meant to me. They think because I never talk about it that I probably don't think of it, either. They little know. There *is* a secret about it—a really unaccountable mystery. I don't believe the girls have ever guessed the first thing about it. They've never said anything to me about it, anyway. It's all long past and dead and gone, but I've never forgotten it, though I never talk to any one about it. I don't know why I'm talking to you like this now, either, except that it's sometimes easier to talk to a stranger about the things that affect you most, than it is to your own."

Grandma stopped abruptly just there, as if she had said too much, and was silent, counting the stitches in a new chain for several minutes. Leila, meanwhile, rocking back and forth feverishly, was on tenterhooks of impatience, waiting for her to go on, sensing the fact that she had been admitted nearer to the heart of the mystery than she had dared hope to be. She

was sure the old lady would continue with her recital, but was doomed to tremendous disappointment when Grandma rose with the remark that she couldn't sit talking any longer but must go into the kitchen to see if Hagar was making her biscuits for supper, and disappeared forthwith indoors.

"Well, anyhow," mused Leila, when she was left alone, "I've got on to something this afternoon, in spite of my headache, that I'll warrant those three would give their eye-teeth to know! I wonder what they'd think if they knew what I've found out from Grandma Fletcher this afternoon."

And when the three in question rode into the yard, half an hour later, there was on Leila's face a cryptic smile that Ronny found it impossible to account for.

CHAPTER VII

RONNY GETS DOWN TO BRASS TACKS

IT was late that afternoon when the three left Pettigrew's Folly. It had not been a particularly profitable afternoon as far as their researches had gone. Apart from the disclosure of Grandma Fletcher's relationship to Judge Cotesworth, Ronny had learned nothing new, though they had spent several hours in the secret room and had gone over the old paper very carefully.

"Did your grandma say anything more about why the judge didn't leave this place to her father?" he questioned a number of times. "Did he cut him off from everything, like they do sometimes?"

"No," answered Naomi. "Grandma says the judge left his only son two other large plantations he had, farther north, between here and Beaufort. But this was the pick of them all and had always been left to the eldest son. It was a

terrible disappointment to her father, and a very unexpected one. He had the other property, it is true, and was well enough off, but he loved Cotesworth Hall better than any spot on earth. Then the war came and of course he lost his life in it, and his plantations went too, and Grandma was almost penniless till she married and came to live where she is now.

"That was Grandpa Fletcher's property," she explained. "She has enough to live on, and takes boarders once in a while mainly because she's lonely and likes the company. But of course Pettigrew's Folly would have been hers except for the strange hitch in things that nobody was ever able to explain. Grandma doesn't seem to like to talk about it very much."

"Well," declared Ronny, at length, scratching his head meditatively, "tell you what. Suppose we take this old paper out of here and back to the house with us. It'll bear some more studying, and I'd like to give it the once-over more carefully than I've done yet. Would you trust me with it? I got a dandy wallet here with a strap-compartment that it'll fit into fine and I'll be awfully careful of it."

The girls agreed that there could be no harm

in that proceeding, and Ronny hid the paper carefully in an imposing wallet of ample proportions.

"I'll get down to brass tacks on this," he promised, "while you folks are off at school, whenever I can get away from that nuisance of a Leila. Never do to let *her* in on this!"

Leila had quite recovered from her illness when they reached home and there was no further chance that evening to discuss their mystery. But Ronny had laid dark and desperate plans to get away by himself the next morning, and by the very nature of his scheme he was enabled to succeed. For he had elected to go fishing, and of all the human occupations his sister detested, fishing took the lead. So while Miss Leila Speer prepared to worry through a lonely morning with the inevitable movie magazine (now grown very stale and no others to be obtained in the town!) Ronny was hiking over the little foot-bridge across Fletcher's Cove to the town, where he intended to purchase a fishing outfit and bait if such were available and betake himself to the steamer landing at the foot of Calhoun Street, where it was rumored the best fishing was to be obtained.

He shook his head dolefully over the possibilities the two or three general stores of the town offered.

"Dead!" he muttered, when he had inspected their stock, which ranged from canned goods to crockery, and included patent medicines, fresh meat, farming implements, and candy. "Asleep at the switch!"

"What did you say?" benevolently inquired old Mr. Tripp, over his glasses.

"I'd just like to get a fishing-pole, if you have such a thing," explained Ronny, wearily.

"And how do you like Burton?" demanded Mr. Tripp, as he picked out a pole from an assortment over in one corner. And without waiting for a reply to that he went on: "Fish bitin' splendid to-day, down off the dock. Caught three myself, this mornin'. And it's right early for 'em, too."

Loaded with the necessary paraphernalia, Ronny sauntered down the main street,—which was nothing but a white oyster-shell road with no sidewalks,—past the old church at the water's edge which had been shelled during the Civil War, and on to the landing at the foot of the street. He sat himself down on the end of

the wharf, with his feet hanging over the edge, set up his pole in proper fashion, cast his line, and then laid the pole down by his side and pulled out his wallet.

There was not a soul in sight. If all the inhabitants of the town had been asleep in bed, the place could not have been more deserted. And in the safety of this solitude, with the blue water under his feet and the bluer sky overhead, and his only company a few white herons wading on the marsh islands a short distance away, Ronny proceeded to work at his problem. On another bit of paper, with a pocket pencil, he began making copious notes and was recalled to the memory of his new fishing-rod only by seeing it almost disappear over the edge of the wharf.

When he had hauled it in and unhooked a sizable bass from the line, he laid the pole aside as hampering in his present occupation and went back to his notes.

"Golly!" he murmured to himself once or twice. "Golly! I have an idea!"

And so the long, lazy morning wore away. He was recalled to present affairs about noontime, by a sharp voice at his shoulder.

"Well, for goodness' sake!" exclaimed Leila Speer, bending over to obtain a better view of his notes, "is *this* the way you do when you fish? What's that you're cramming away in your wallet?"

"It's no affair of *yours!*" retorted Ronny, angrily, concealing his precious papers in his pocket. "I should think you'd be ashamed of yourself to come sneaking along like that, just to annoy a feller. What you here for, anyway?"

"Dinner's ready and Mrs. Fletcher sent me to find you," returned Leila, stiffly. "And if you think I want to know about any of your silly old affairs, you're mistaken. I'm lonesome and blue and I can't even speak to you without your snapping my head off. I'm sick of it!" And Ronny noted, to his unbounded astonishment, that there were actual tears in his sister's eyes as she turned and walked away. The sight was too much for him; for he was really a good-natured boy.

"Aw, say, Leila! Can the sob-stuff! I didn't mean to be grouchy!" he exclaimed penitently. And grabbing up his rod and his one trophy, he ran up to her and tucked her hand, which

had been whisking away some surreptitious tears, under his arm.

"You're just downright mean to me," she continued as they turned toward the lane that led over the foot-bridge. "You go off with those girls all the time and leave me stark alone all day long, and I'm so miserable I could just die . . . or something! There's *nothing* to do in this awful place and . . . and I like to be with folks just as much as . . . anybody."

Tears threatened again, and this time Ronny did not scoff at them. Truth to tell, he was not only surprised but a trifle conscience-stricken. They *had* rather pointedly deserted poor Leila, whose misfortune was that she had little within her own mind to entertain her, when movies and shopping and like diversions were lacking. Perhaps it wasn't her fault, reflected Ronny. She was a girl, and not all girls were as resourceful and happy and entertaining as Naomi and Enid. Leila wasn't a bad sort when she forgot to pose as a young lady and acted like a human being. It was only lately that she'd begun to act so "uppy." Perhaps if they gave her a chance— A sudden thought occurred to him,

and in his penitent desire to make amends to his sister he put it into words.

"Look here," he began, stopping short in the middle of the foot-bridge, "the girls and I have a secret, a *very* important secret. It isn't mine; it's theirs. And yet it's some mine, too, or all of ours—especially if Dad gets that Pettigrew place. We haven't let you in because you didn't seem to care a tap about being with us; we'd have taken you in to begin with if you had seemed interested. It's something deep—I can tell you—and it's got me guessing. But I can't see you being lonesome and blue, and if you'd like to join us and help dope it out, I'll talk it over with the girls and see if they want to take you in. How about it? It's their secret, really, or I'd tell you the whole thing right now."

Leila's eyes fairly sparkled, and a new expression of interest dawned in her usually rather discontented face.

"Will you, really?" she cried. "I wouldn't tell those girls, but I've been just crazy to be in this with you. I knew there was something you were all deep in, but I wouldn't have asked *them* about it—no, not if I'd been hung for it! But

if you let me into it, they can't say a word."

"Now, see here," said Ronny, sternly, "just can all that line of talk! If you come into this at all, it's only with the consent of the whole outfit. I ain't got anything to do with it, personally. Naomi and Enid'll take you in, I *think,* because they're good sports and really want to be friends with you if you'll only let 'em. But they won't stand for any highty-tighty stuff, and neither will I."

"All right, all right, Ronny!" Leila agreed hastily. "I'll do anything you say as long as I don't have to be left out in the cold any more. I can't bear that any longer." And she laid an appealing hand on his arm.

"Very well, then," conceded her brother. "Just you lie low and try to act nice and human, and I'll see the girls about it this afternoon. Don't you try to butt in just yet, but let me work it. 'Twon't hurt you to stand one more afternoon by yourself while I talk it over with them." And to this Leila agreed with quite surprising alacrity. So meek and humble, indeed, was her demeanor for the rest of the day that Ronny might have been heard to mumble to himself:

"Gee whiz! Who'd have thought it? She must've been hard hit, poor kid!"

It was with unmitigated surprise that Enid and Naomi, that afternoon, heard Ronny quietly propose to them, right in front of his sister, that they saddle their mounts and ride over to Pettigrew's Folly. And they fairly lost their breath when Leila, instead of objecting or insisting on joining the expedition, as quietly remarked that she expected to go out with Grandma Fletcher and make a call on a near neighbor while they were away. Even the twinkle in Ronny's eye as she made the announcement was a mystery, and it was not till Ronny and Naomi and Enid were cantering through the pine barrens that he chose to enlighten them, recounting the episode of the morning and putting his proposition before them fairly and squarely.

"Why, of course we'll take her in!" cried Naomi, heartily. "It's a shame that she's been so lonesome, but she didn't seem to want to be with us before. Let's go right back and get her!"

"No, that won't work to-day," objected Ronny. "We've got to find another mount for

her or she'll have to ride behind me on Hannah. And I've been doping out one or two important things I want to talk over with you right away. Anyhow, she's gone calling. Let's get on to the mansion and tamp down a few things I'm keen to find out."

When they had ascended to the secret room and opened the trunk once more, Ronny suggested that they take the old Bible and go into the larger room where they would have a better light. And there on the bare floor, around the weighty old volume, the three settled themselves. Ronny drew his papers from his wallet and began impressively:

"Now, I don't set up to be any Sherlock Holmes, but I always liked the way that feller went at things, and this morning I started out to work it up like I thought he might have doped it. There are some things in this that hit you in the face, sort of, they're just so plain *asking* to be puzzled out. The first one is this: Who's this 'R' he speaks of when he says, 'If it should prove that R—'? If we can find that out, we've got somewhere."

"Well, of course we can't tell positively," answered Enid, "but it has always seemed rather

likely to us that he meant his own son. That son's name was Randolph. We can't be absolutely certain, for a good many people's names begin with R, but—"

"No need of saying any more!" cried Ronny, delightedly. "If I'd known that before, it would have been simpler. Nail it that it's Randolph and we'll proceed from there. The old judge is trying to prove something about this Randolph, and it's got something to do with the sun-dial. Wonder why he didn't finish that sentence. . . . Do you know what I think? I think that the old feller was one of those people that are always scribbling things on bits of paper—scribbling their thoughts and any old thing that comes into their heads. There are people like that. I sort of do it myself, quite often. Find myself scribbling things I hadn't intended to, at all. I think the judge was like that. Perhaps he drew this picture of the dial and used to sit and stare at it, and then he'd get to scribbling his thoughts about it. When he was scribbling that last one, something told him he'd better stop, I figure. That's why it's cut short."

"Oh!" exclaimed Enid, pink-cheeked with excitement. "I do believe you're right! The old

judge must have been the scribbling sort. Do you remember, Naomi, those old law-books were all scribbled up along the margins? All sorts of sentences . . . nothing to do with law at all, many of them. And then there'd be drawings, too. Queer little squares and stars and all sorts of figures! Yes, he probably scribbled and drew and made lines and dots when he was thinking, just as we often do when we're studying or working out problems."

"Suffering cats! Is that so?—I mean about those old books being all scribbled up?" cried Ronny, springing to his feet. "Then the very next thing we've got to do is go all through them. It just might be that he'd scribbled something else somewhere that would give us a clue!"

CHAPTER VIII

LEILA PROVIDES SOME SURPRISES

THE afternoon waned and shadows began to creep into that upper room of Pettigrew's Folly, finding the three still bent, each over a dusty law-book or ancient ledger once belonging to old Judge Cotesworth. Finally Naomi glanced up.

"Good gracious! Look at the time!" she exclaimed, staring at her little wrist-watch. "It's half-past five and Grandma will think we're all hopelessly lost. It's getting dark, too. Let's put these things away and get right back."

They hustled the musty old books back into their hiding-place, locked up the house, returned the key to Coosaw, and scrambled on to their mounts.

"Did you come across anything?" demanded Enid of the others, as they cantered through

the pine barrens in the waning light of sunset. "I didn't. All the books I went through had nothing on their margins but dots and scrawls and words that meant nothing whatever."

"I hadn't much better luck," acknowledged Naomi. "I went carefully through a big old account-book and it was all about buying supplies for the household and sometimes buying or selling a slave or some horses or something like that. Just one item at the first would have been of the least interest to us. It spoke of paying twenty dollars to a Thaddeus Colcroft for 'setting up and properly adjusting sun-dial.' And it was dated somewhere back in eighteen thirty-four, I think. But that doesn't get us anywhere."

"Well, I had better luck than that," Ronny stated, and he added rather surprisingly, 'but if you don't mind, I'd rather not explain just this minute what it was . . . not until I have time to look over it again and think about it a little. It was . . . *queer!*"

With their interest roused to the highest pitch, the girls had much ado not to besiege him with questions, but they managed courteously to forbear, since he had asked them to do so.

They found supper ready on their return, and Leila in a surprisingly amiable and uninquisitive frame of mind. After supper, Grandma Fletcher announced that she was going to run over and spend the evening with her next-door neighbor, down the road, and asked the four if they minded being left alone for a few hours. As this fitted in excellently with their own plans, they assured her that they would not, and settled down cozily about the blazing open fire after she had gone. And by the light of the burning logs behind the high old brass fender they initiated Leila into the mystery from which she had heretofore been shut out.

By unspoken agreement, Naomi and Enid let Ronny do most of the talking. And in his fascinating jargon of slang he explained the peculiar riddle that seemed to involve his and Leila's future home, Pettigrew's Folly. Secretly, Naomi and Enid had been much in doubt about how Leila would take it, or whether or not an affair like that would appeal to her who seemed to care only for jazz and moving pictures. She was so totally unlike either Ronny or themselves. She exhibited no enthusiasms and was indifferent to things outside her own particular

interests. She had more than once expressed the hope that her father would at once begin to tear down "that rickety old place," and entertained dreams of an edifice resembling one of her favorite moving-picture palaces.

"So you see," ended Ronny, after giving her all the details to date, including their hunt, that afternoon, for clues among the marginal notes in Judge Cotesworth's books, "that's about as far as we've got up to present report. Maybe when you come in on this, you can help along by running over those books, to begin with. There's a heap of 'em left to do, and goodness knows how long the job'll take us. That'll be some lift."

His sister regarded him speculatively for a moment. Her arms were folded and she had been staring into the fire as he talked. Almost her attitude had suggested bored indifference. Presently she spoke and surprised them all.

"This is a funny little old town," she began with apparent irrelevance. "Have you ever been to any of their afternoon tea-parties, Naomi and Enid?"

"Not very often," answered Naomi, wondering what this had to do with the matter in hand. "Hardly ever, I should say. We go to visit our

girl friends, but scarcely ever go with Grandma, and when we do, we generally go outside and ramble around till they serve the refreshments, because their talk doesn't interest us."

"Well, you'd better go to one sometime . . . and stay indoors," replied Leila, cryptically.

"Why, what do you mean?" the others demanded in chorus.

"I know you don't see what I'm getting at," countered Leila, "but the best way to show you is to tell you what happened this afternoon. . . . I went with Mrs. Fletcher and thought I was going to be bored stiff listening to all those old ladies talking, but instead of that, I got a regular thrill, taking in all that went on. . . . Say, do they ever talk about anything besides their ancestors? Seems to me that's the principal topic most of the time!"

"Their *ancestors?*" murmured the other two girls, slightly puzzled by Leila's question.

"You said it! I don't think there was a name mentioned but some one would say: 'Mrs. So-and-so? Oh, yes, her grandfather was Colonel Thingumbob, wasn't he? They came from the Thingumbobs of Something-or-other County.' And then some one else would say: 'No he

wasn't, anything of the sort. Colonel Thingumbob was my grandfather's brother and no relation whatever to Mrs. So-and-so. The So-and-sos never *were* any account, anyhow.' And then they'd have *some* battle back and forth, and every one would take sides, till finally they'd got *that* matter settled. It was too funny. That's about how they spent the whole afternoon."

There was a general giggle at Leila's description, and the girls could not but acknowledge that they recognized the brand of conversation.

"Yes, we've heard it all so much that we never think about it or listen to it any more," laughed Naomi. "But, if you don't mind explaining, Leila, has this anything to do wtih what we were talking about? I don't see the connection."

"It's got a whole lot to do with it, if you'll just let me tell what happened before the show was over," returned Leila. "About the middle of the afternoon the lady of the house went out to the kitchen to get refreshments ready, and Grandma Fletcher went out to help her, I guess. Anyhow, while she was out of the room, two of 'em got after me and started the ball rolling by saying they'd heard my father was going to

buy Pettigrew's Folly and asked me if I liked the place. I said it would be nice when he got that old rattletrap pulled down and a new house put up, and you ought to have seen the look of horror on all their faces! One of 'em spoke up and said:

" 'It pretty nearly broke Randolph Cotesworth's heart when the old judge left that place to his second wife instead of to him, his only son. There was something mighty queer about that, too. Everybody thought Randolph must have done something shady that the old judge found out about, or he wouldn't have cut him off like that.'

"And then some one else spoke up; I can't remember her name, but she's a perfect shark at that sort of thing. She said:

" 'You don't know what you're talking about, Hattie Shellman. You're related to the Cotesworths and you've no business to talk that way. Of course, it's only by marriage and a good way back, but I should think you'd be more loyal. Randolph Cotesworth never did a thing in his life he oughtn't to. The old judge was a perfect crank on some subjects and they say he got it into his head that Randolph—'

"And just then some one said: 'Ssh! Here comes Cordelia Fletcher back.' And sure enough, your grandma was coming in from the kitchen. But the one that was talking—I can't remember her name, but she has big snapping black eyes and a tight little mouth—she whispered, 'Well, you know what I mean—that oak affair!' And then she didn't have a chance to say any more, but they all nodded solemnly and took to their knitting again."

"That was Cousin Frances, no doubt," murmured Enid, "the one with the tight little mouth. She certainly is a tartar!"

"You said it!" assented Leila. "I could see that with half an eye. And the way she buttoned up that tight little mouth and rolled those black eyes around the room! . . . Nothing very interesting happened after that, but I couldn't get just that last out of my head. I wanted to ask your grandma about it on the way home, but I somehow couldn't screw up the courage. If *they* didn't dare talk about it before her, I certainly didn't have the nerve. It stuck in the back of my mind all this evening while you were telling me about this, and I began to wonder if there was any connection."

"You just bet there's some connection!" put in Ronny, excitedly. "You're some little Sherlock Holmes, Leila! I have to hand it to you. You've landed on the very thing I've been addling my brains over all the afternoon."

"What's that?" she demanded, obviously pleased and gratified at his praise.

"That there's something queer this here Randolph was supposed to have pulled off. Not that he really *did* . . . we don't know whether he did or not . . . but anyhow, the old judge must have thought he did, and that's what the whole matter hinges on. It wasn't a secret kept just in the family, for evidently other people knew about it. Now, it's going to be our business to chase down just what it's all about. You got the first hint this afternoon. That old pill said something about an 'oak affair,' didn't she? Sounds to me like a piece of furniture, but you never can tell! Have you girls got any idea about it, at all?" He turned to Naomi and Enid. Both of them looked puzzled.

"I certainly haven't," declared Naomi. "It doesn't seem to mean much, does it? But I'm sure we could ask some questions of Grandma that would help us out."

"I wouldn't," asserted Ronny. "From what you say, the old lady doesn't like to talk about it much, and if she's sore on the subject, we oughtn't to bother her about it, just yet. We'll save that as a last resort, in case we can't get at it any other way."

Here Leila opened her mouth to speak, but shut it again, saying nothing.

Naomi got up to put fresh logs on the fire, and for a few moments thereafter they all sat silent, gazing into the leaping flames and meditating upon the newest developments in their mystery. Naomi and Enid were privately very much astonished at the way Leila had entered into the spirit of their undertaking and also at her keenness of perception in reading people, and her sense of humor and appreciation. They had certainly not suspected these traits in her and were beginning to believe she might be an asset, after all. As for Leila herself, they could see she was almost pathetically grateful to be allowed to share their secret, but such was her nature that she would rather have died than to admit that very patent fact, in so many words.

Presently Ronny began to chuckle to himself,

and in one breath the others called for an explanation of his mirth.

"I was beginning to wonder," he said munching one of the apples Naomi had just passed around, "when you girls—I mean you, Enid and Naomi—were going to fall upon me and make me tell you what *I* discovered this afternoon."

"But you asked us not to!" cried Enid. "You didn't think we were going to bother you about that till you said something more, yourself, did you?"

"Well, all I can say is, you're different from most girls, then! I didn't want to tell you this afternoon, 'cause it was a bit too vague and I hardly knew whether it meant anything or not. But now that Leila's given us her line of talk about this afternoon, I've got another hunch on it and perhaps it would be just as well to talk it over. . . . Have you ever heard tell of any one connected with the old judge named Bolton Lawrence?"

Naomi and Enid both shook their heads.

"I don't remember ever having heard the name mentioned," said Naomi, "but Lawrence is an old family name around here. Perhaps

Grandma would know . . . if we could ask her without giving away too much."

"Well, don't do it just yet," said Ronny, hastily. "I ain't quite ready to open up about that, for the present."

"But what did you find?" demanded the impatient Leila. "You sure are the limit for mixing things up and then leaving every one guessing!"

"Pipe down, old girl; I'm coming to it!" Ronny grinned. "I spent all my time this afternoon looking over an old law-book. It was called 'Blackstone on' . . . something or other, but the title doesn't matter. The main thing is that it must have been a favorite of the old judge's, because he'd scribbled a lot on the margins . . . sometimes law-notes I couldn't understand and scraps of things that didn't mean much, anyhow. In one place he'd written something and crossed it all out, but not quite enough but that you could read some of it if you tried pretty hard. I'd brought along a small magnifying-glass for some such emergency as that, and I used it, good and proper. And this is what he'd scrawled:

"'*If I could only be sure how much Bolton Lawrence really knows—what his motive is. He was never under the oak, but . . .*' That's all I could get, but there's the oak again, you see, and it sure must mean something. But who's Bolton Lawrence and what's he got to do with it all?"

Ronny sat back after his disclosure and folded his arms, watching to see the effect of this latest discovery on his hearers. That they were satisfactorily stirred by the new problem, he couldn't doubt, but before they had time to discuss it, they heard Grandma Fletcher on the back piazza.

"We can't talk it over any more to-night, I reckon," breathed Naomi, "but I'll say you've made some find this time, Ronny. The next thing we must do is to hunt down what we can about this Bolton Lawrence, isn't it?"

"Say, girls," interrupted Leila, in a hurried whisper, "I wonder if you'd mind if I ask a favor. Would you care if Ronny and I took the ponies and went over to Pettigrew's Folly while you're at school to-morrow morning? I've got a hunch, myself, about something and

I want to look it up before we lose another minute on it. You don't care, do you?"

The girls both expressed instant and eager approbation, marveling more than anything else over the remarkable change in Leila.

CHAPTER IX

EVENTS MOVE ON

BUT as it turned out later, Leila and Ronny did not ride over to Pettigrew's Folly the next morning. Instead, Leila made another expedition, quite on her own responsibility and unknown to the others until it was over. It happened that that morning Grandma Fletcher suddenly found her kitchen supplies lacking in baking-powder, at a critical moment when Hagar was otherwise occupied. Leila, who was idling on the porch, saw Grandma Fletcher preparing to hurry away in the direction of the village and was prompted to ask the reason. And hearing it, she herself volunteered to go on the errand, as she knew Grandma Fletcher begrudged the time it would take from her morning's work.

And it was while Leila was making the purchase in Mr. Tripp's store that she encountered

again the redoubtable "Cousin Frances" of the snapping black eyes and tight little mouth. And it was this encounter that led to some striking developments.

"It was this way," Leila began, to Ronny and the girls. They had all ridden over that afternoon, to Pettigrew's Folly together, the two sisters on old Hannah, leaving Beauty and Spot to Ronny and Leila. Ronny had protested at the arrangement, but as the distance was comparatively short, and Leila unused to so precarious and bumpy a mount as Hannah, he had agreed to it for this time at least.

"Miss Frances tried to be very nice to me," went on Leila. "She asked me, of course, how I liked Burton (they all ask you that about every time you meet them!) and then she went on to ask whether I'd seen all the sights of the town. I pretty near insulted her by saying I hadn't supposed there were any special sights to see! She went right up in the air at that and asked me if I knew that there was one of the most important sights in that part of the country, right there near the town, and hadn't I ever heard of the Secession Oak? I hated to confess it didn't mean a thing to me, but I was going to

say so, when suddenly something familiar about it struck me. *'Oak . . . oak,'* I kept thinking. And then it dawned on me. And you'd better believe I grabbed the chance!

" 'Do you mean to say *that's* around here?' I asked, as if I'd known all about it since I was two years old. 'Certainly it is!' she answered. 'It's right on my way home. If you care to walk along with me, I'll show it to you and explain all about it.' And then I clean forgot your grandma's baking-powder and just went right along with Miss Frances. She took me down a side lane, talking sixteen to the dozen all the way, and a little later stood me in front of the biggest old live-oak I've ever seen. Its branches are tremendous; they spread around all over the place and the trunk is so big it would take I don't know how many people to touch hands standing round it, and it had a sign on, 'Secession Oak,' and—"

"My patience!" interrupted Enid. "*That* old thing? Why, we've always known about that! It's as much a part of Burton as . . . as the river itself. I never dreamed *that* would have anything to do with our—"

"Well, wait'll you hear what she said," Leila

interrupted in her turn, and resuming her story. "I asked her what it was all about, anyhow, and she pretty nearly slew me with a look. She said:

"I thought every one in the United States knew what happened under Secession Oak! If they don't, they should. It's one of the most important things that ever took place in South Carolina. It was under this tree that, some years before South Carolina seceded from the Union, they held the first meeting of protest and decided that they *would* secede—if not at once, right soon. It was an all-day meeting, and folks came from all over the State and they had a big dinner under it and a great time. Queer you've never heard of that before!'

"Well, I never had, and I didn't care so much about that, but right away I connected the thing with what she'd said yesterday about that 'oak affair,' and I decided then and there that this was where we hit the trail of Randolph Cotesworth. I didn't like to ask her straight out what he had to do with it; that would seem too much like prying. So I just asked:

" 'Who all were there? Do you know?' You ought to have seen her eyes snap. She said:

"'Nearly everybody was there . . . that amounted to anything! There's a whole list of 'em made out; my cousin Thomas Hawksworth has it now. But I'll tell you one person who *wasn't* there,—and we've never got over it to this day,—and that was Randolph Cotesworth, Cordelia Fletcher's father. But don't you ever say I said so. She doesn't like it talked about.'

"Of course I had to promise I wouldn't tell the old lady, and then I suddenly remembered the baking-powder and that she was probably waiting for it right that minute. And I thanked Miss Frances and hurried away, chuckling like everything to think what I'd caught on to without her suspecting it. . . . Now, what do you suppose this has to do with our mystery?"

They had come to the end of their ride, halting at the steps of Pettigrew's Folly and slipping from their mounts. Ronny stood on the steps, with his hands in his pockets, his eyes fixed on the distant line of the river, winding away at the foot of the lawn.

"Gee, Leila!" he suddenly broke forth. "You sure do seem to have a way of lighting right on the spot! I don't know whether its just luck or whether you use your head more than I

thought. But, anyhow, you get there and leave the rest of us 'way behind. I gotta hand it to you! From what you struck this morning, I figure we'll be able to nose out the whole blooming thing!"

His sister fairly glowed with this unaccustomed and wholly unexpected praise.

"Oh, I didn't do anything; it just happened," she deprecated. "If I hadn't met Miss Frances, we'd be just as much in the dark as ever. But how do you think it's going to help us out, now that we've got on to it?"

Ronny's only reply to this was:

"Watch me and you'll soon find out. Let's go get the key right away from Coosaw."

When they had gone upstairs and introduced Leila to the secret of the sliding panel and the hidden room and its contents, Ronny sat down on the floor by the trunk and began to expound his theory.

"It's this way," he pointed out, emphasizing his ideas by thumping on the trunk. "We've got a whole lot of clues here, but they're all sort of muddled up; and our minds are just about as muddled, too. This ain't going to do. We've got to take those clues and string them all to-

gether and sort them out and make up our minds just what we're hunting for and which is the warmest trail and how we're going to follow them up, or we'll never get anywhere at all. Now, I brought along a pencil and paper and before we go any farther I propose we sit right down here and all put our heads together and make a list of those clues and just find out where we're at."

"That's a fine idea, Ronny," agreed Enid. "I've been thinking, myself, that we were getting pretty well wound up in a snarl. Let's suggest all the clues we can think of and you put 'em down and then we can straighten 'em out afterward."

It transpired that after half an hour's concentrated thinking, holding up a paper full of scrawled notes, Ronny delivered himself of the following theory:

"As far as we've gone, it seems to amount to this: Old Judge Cotesworth, who owned this here Cotesworth Hall or Pettigrew's Folly, had a son, Randolph, who ought to have inherited this place when the judge died. For some reason we don't know, the judge didn't leave it to him but to his second wife and she passed

it on to her own relatives and left Randolph out in the cold. What this reason is, we don't know, but it seems to be mixed up with that business about the Secession Oak. Seems as if Randolph wasn't there when he ought to have been,—or at least that's the way it looks to me,—and his father got sore about it. I may be all wrong on that tack. It's only a guess.

"But the most mysterious part of this whole business," he went on, "is something about a sun-dial the old judge had that used to stand out there on the lawn. It had a secret about it; that, we know for sure, 'cause the judge said so himself. I'm not certain what it had to do with all this other affair, but it sure does look like it had *something* to do with it. Then it got all knocked to pieces one dark night—nobody seems to know how or why except this here old Coosaw—and part of it disappeared completely and has never been found. The way I figure it is that if we could find out something more about this sun-dial, we'd pretty near have the whole thing nailed. Coosaw knows and he won't tell; at least, he knows what happened to it.

"Then," Ronny proceeded, "there are two

other things we can't seem to fit into the puzzle. One is about that Bolton Lawrence. It's just possible he mayn't have anything to do with it at all, but I somehow got a strong hunch that he's the villain of the show. The old judge himself wrote that he couldn't be sure how much Lawrence knew or what his motive was. And at the same time he says he was never under the oak—which certainly proves that he must have been missing too when they had that grand old meeting.

"That's about all our clues, I guess," he concluded, "and—"

"You've forgotten one awfully important one," interrupted Enid. "The note written in the different handwriting on that old paper. Naomi and I were almost more impressed with that than anything else. It's the one that says, 'This is very disturbing and may alter everything,' and that it must be looked into. What may it alter? That's what Naomi and I have always asked ourselves. We've thought it meant that it might alter the matter of who this property really belonged to. Could it mean anything else? And who could have thought that or written it?"

"I know," put in Leila, unexpectedly. "It was probably written by Randolph Cotesworth after his father died. He'd be the most likely one, wouldn't he?"

"That isn't possible," answered Naomi, quietly, "because Grandma told us once that her father never put his foot inside Cotesworth Hall again after the reading of his father's will, by which he was deprived of Cotesworth Hall. He had never cared for his stepmother and he just shut himself up on one of his own distant plantations till the war broke out and he went away and was killed. So of course it couldn't have been he."

"Hi! Wait a minute. I got an idea!" suddenly shouted Ronny, scrambling to his feet. "Didn't you tell me that Coosaw once confessed to you that he knew about what happened to the old sun-dial, but he couldn't tell you about it because his missis, 'Miss Lucill',' had made him promise not to? All right. Then don't you see it was this Miss Lucill' who was having something done with that old dial? Ain't it as clear as crystal that *she* was the one who made that last note? She'd found that paper and got worried about it and thought maybe she could tear

up that dial or something and find that secret? And probably she got old Coosaw to help her and then made him promise never to tell about it. And I'll bet dollars to doughnuts that if we could find some writing we were sure was hers, we'd see that it was exactly the same as that last note."

"I know!" cried Enid, also fired with an idea. "I have a way I can prove it, right this minute!" and she was off and away downstairs before they could even demand what she meant. But she came back shortly, breathless and panting, and triumphantly planked down two or three old books, in front of the group. And when she had recovered her breath, she explained:

"These are some old children's books that belonged to Mrs. Pettigrew's little son. When he was tired of them she gave them to old Coosaw for his children to amuse themselves with. But Coosaw and Missouri always thought too much of them to let the children destroy them, and they've kept them carefully put away on a high shelf and regard them as their chiefest treasure. They've often showed them to us. But see, here on the fly-leaf is written in each one, 'To little Stepney, from his mother.' Now com-

pare that writing with the last note on the paper."

Ronny scrabbled through his wallet and brought out the paper and laid it beside the writing in the books, and it took no trained eye to discover that the two were identical. And with this important fact established, a completely new light was thrown on the mystery.

"Golly!" exclaimed Ronny, executing a double shuffle in the limited space between the trunk and the wall, and sitting down abruptly on the trunk, gasping for breath, "we sure have made one big step forward this afternoon! Mrs. Pettigrew was certainly hot on the trail of the sun-dial, all right, and, the way I got it figured out, she didn't make a whole lot of progress on it, either. I dunno why I think so, but I just do. Strikes me things would've been different if she'd found out what she wanted to know. Anyhow, right here an' now I can tell you the lines we've got to work on; and we're all going to have something to do.

"I'm going to get hold of old Coosaw," he went on. "He seems to have taken a shine to me and I've noticed he likes to chin to me about old times. I got a scheme that I think'll fetch him

round a little more about this sun-dial business, but I don't want to explain that yet. . . . Naomi and Enid, you see if you can't get your grandma to tell you a little more about her father, Randolph Cotesworth, and what all that was about the Secession Oak. . . . And Leila, you just get next to Miss Frances again as soon as you can, and see if she has a line on this here Bolton Lawrence. She seems to know about everything that ever happened around here; she ought to know him. And he sure is the unknown quantity in this problem of ours. Now let's go down and have another squint at that old sun-dial."

The four of them proceeded downstairs and out upon the unkempt lawn, and they stood about the fallen shaft of the dial while Ronny explained his theory.

"What I can't understand is this," he began. "If Coosaw and his missis tried to rip up the sun-dial, that night, they *might* have got it to pieces somehow or other with a crowbar and such tools, and tried to poke around the inside of the shaft, or something like that. But here's what gets me: how in the world did they manage to land this heavy shaft 'way over here on

the edge of the river bank, and why should they have moved it that far, and what became of the rest of it? I can't figure that out at all."

"Oh, I can easily answer one part of that," said Naomi. "We got that out of Coosaw long ago. Of course he didn't acknowledge *he* was mixed up in it, but he did confess that the day after the sun-dial was disturbed they found the pieces lying around the lawn, right near where it had stood. And of course, too, the big marble base or foundation for it was still in place. He said Mrs. Pettigrew always intended to have it fixed up again; but before she got round to it, the war broke out and, in the confusion that followed, things were left just as they stood.

"It was after she had gone away that the soldiers who were quartered here moved the whole thing away from the center of the lawn, because they wanted the space for drill purposes," Naomi explained. "They rolled the shaft over to the edge and broke up the marble base and took it somewhere else. But when I asked Coosaw what had become of the metal dial, he hedged. He said no, the soldiers didn't get *that,* he was sure, but he either couldn't or wouldn't tell us what did become of it. I've always sus-

pected that he knew, but just felt under some obligation never to tell about it."

Ronny thought this over for several silent moments, after which he delivered his verdict:

"If all this is so, one thing is as sure as shooting to me. The secret's in that dial plate, somewhere!"

CHAPTER X

COUSIN FRANCES ENTERTAINS

MISS FRANCES MARVIN was not expecting company that afternoon. Her front hair was still in kid curlers and she sat at ease, in a wrapper and comfortable old slippers, on her back piazza, fixing the greens for supper. (Every one in Burton dined at noon and had supper as the evening meal.) The only other member of her family, her rheumatic elder brother, sat hunched up in a chair in the kitchen and fretfully complained at intervals or asked the same question over and over again.

While Miss Frances washed the turnip-tops, her thoughts were busy with the new Northern visitors at Cousin Cordelia Fletcher's, and the absorbing news about what they planned to do with old Pettigrew's Folly. Especially was her mind occupied with the remembrance of the pert young miss whom Cordelia Fletcher had brought with her to Sarah Cocroft's one after-

noon, and whom she had herself encountered a morning or two later at Mr. Tripp's store.

"She's a saucy piece!" reflected Miss Frances. "And the way she dresses . . . !" She inspected a turnip-top critically and decided to discard it. "I wonder her father allows her to wear such clothes . . . and in the morning, too!" Well, I suppose that's the way they all do up North. . . . Ben, *do* stop groaning! What's the matter now? Rheumatism worse?"

Her brother, in the kitchen, had been grunting feebly and bending over at intervals, as if in great distress.

"No, I dropped my paper and can't reach it," he muttered. "Called you twice and you didn't hear. Day-dreaming, I reckon."

"I 'clare, I didn't hear a word." Miss Frances left her greens and came in to retrieve the paper. Suddenly she glanced through the window and exclaimed:

"Merciful gracious! If there isn't that girl now! What ever can she want, coming here this time of day?"

"What girl? what girl?" demanded Brother Ben, eagerly trying to peer through the window with his near-sighted eyes.

"That Speer girl—Speer the Shoe King's daughter," Miss Frances explained. "You've never seen her. They've just come to town. He's buying the old Pettigrew place for a winter home. Don't you remember? I told you about it."

"Don't remember a thing," Ben assured her. "You never told me a word. Don't see why you keep interesting pieces of news like that from me all the time. I can't get away from here . . . don't hear any news!" He rattled the paper irritably.

"Oh, Ben! How you forget!" said his sister reproachfully. "I've told you all about it a dozen times. Well, I can't stop to explain now. She's coming in the gate. You'll have to entertain her while I fix my hair and change my dress. Or tell her to go sit on the front porch till I'm ready. Can't see what she came for, nohow—" And Miss Frances scurried away, leaving her brother to receive the caller.

For some time Leila could discover no one on the Marvins' premises. She explored the front piazza, but found the front door shut, and no one responded to her knock. Then, undiscouraged, she proceeded round to the back of the

house, mounted the back steps, and tapped at the kitchen door. It was Mr. Benjamin Marvin who bade her come in. She entered, to find no one but the old gentleman, whom she had never seen before, hunched up in a chair, peering at her with dim near-sighted eyes.

"Good afternoon!" she began. "I came to see Miss Marvin. Is she at home?"

"You'll have to excuse me. I can't get up . . . rheumatism," he explained. "Yes, my sister is home. She'll be down in a minute or two. Won't you sit down? What's this my sister tells me about your father buying the old Pettigrew place? I'm so shut in here . . . rheumatism . . . never hear any news. You going to live there all the year round? Burton's a pretty nice place to spend the whole—"

But at this moment, Miss Frances came down and rescued her bewildered guest from the torrent of questions and comments that Leila had been breathlessly trying to follow.

"Good afternoon," began Miss Frances, frostily. "Won't you come into the living-room?" And she escorted the way thither, reflecting that this Speer girl didn't seem to know it wasn't Burton etiquette for a new-comer in

the town to call on her neighbors before she had, herself, been called on. And she determined, moreover, that she wasn't going to unbend too much to any one who seemed so ignorant, even if the person *was* a Shoe King's daughter. Who was a Shoe King of Bridgeport, anyway, compared with the blue-blooded Marvins of South Carolina!

Leila followed her into a room of ancient shabby furniture, whose walls were hung with dim oil-portraits of Confederate officers, a steel engraving of General Robert E. Lee, and a sword draped with a tattered Confederate flag. The windows were closed, the room had a musty and unused smell, and Leila guessed that Miss Frances and her brother dwelt mostly in the big kitchen.

Leila was not slow to feel the chilliness of Miss Frances's manner, but she was undaunted by it. She had a quite adequate excuse for being there, and she guessed accurately the cause of Miss Frances's attitude toward her. Entirely at her ease, she began:

"Mrs. Fletcher asked me to stop over here and see if you could lend her the pattern for those knitted table mats that you were working

on the other day. I was going out for a walk anyhow, and I said I'd just as lief stop in for it, if she'd like to have me. I hope it isn't bothering you."

This put an entirely different face on the matter and Miss Frances was mollified. The girl had a legitimate errand here, after all, and could be treated with more cordiality. Miss Frances thawed perceptibly.

"Oh, certainly!" she responded. "I'll go get it right away. I knitted half a dozen of 'em last week. Tell Cordelia to be careful 'bout that drop-stitch every second row. It's kind of tricky. . . . How do you like Burton? You reckon you're going to enjoy it here?"

Leila replied, for the eleven hundredth time (so it seemed to her!) how she liked Burton, and sat listening patiently to a long description of its far superior attractions "before the war," wondering all the while how she could introduce the subject that was nearest her interest—indeed, whether or not she dared introduce it at all.

It was certain that Miss Frances did seem to know about everybody and everything connected with Burton in former days. She ought

to be a perfect mine of information, if one only knew how to approach her in the right way. She was expatiating now upon the oil-portraits that hung about the walls, and names that meant nothing to Leila Speer were being explained about and extolled at a breathless rate:

"That's my cousin, Calhoun Taylor—that one in the corner over there. He was one of the first to be killed after Sherman's army landed at Hilton Head. . . . And that one there, the one with the beard, was my Uncle Lester. He was at Paris Island and afterward with General Beauregard. He was wounded at Cheraw, later on, and was never able to go back to fighting again. But all his sons were killed. . . . That's my grandfather's portrait—the one over the mantel. When Sherman's army got into the town, one of the soldiers ran his sword right through that picture. We patched it up afterward; but you can see the slash in it."

She went on till all the portraits and other relics had been reviewed. Leila listened to it all patiently, tried to make appropriate replies, and hoped that the next name mentioned might be the one she wanted most to hear. But it did not come, and presently Brother Ben, with

great difficulty, shuffled in. When he had been comfortably settled in a chair, by his sister, he immediately changed the character of the conversation. In place of the long monologue on the history of the family portraits to which Leila had been listening, he began an exhaustive and exhausting catechism of questions:

"You say your father's bought a place near town . . . what place was it, Frances? . . . oh, the Pettigrew place! And his name's what? . . . oh, yes, I remember now . . . Speer. And what's he going to do?—live here all year round? Oh, I forgot; you said he wanted it just for a winter place. And is he going to renovate the house? . . ." And so on and on and on, often repeating himself and forgetting the answers three minutes after they had been given. Finally Miss Frances herself came to the rescue and suggested:

"Now Ben, we mustn't tire this young lady by asking too many questions. I'm going to take her out in the garden to see my roses. . . . Wouldn't you like to come, Miss Speer?"

Leila acquiesced with joyful alacrity and after they had escorted old Mr. Marvin back to his more comfortable chair in the kitchen,

they went down the steps to a garden where some really beautiful roses were climbing and twining all over a trellised arbor. There were other lovely flowers, including jessamine and japonicas (the azaleas were not yet in bloom), but roses were plainly Miss Frances's specialty, and she launched into a long description of their care and habits.

Leila listened to it all for nearly half an hour, wild with impatience to turn the conversation into other channels. She personally knew nothing whatever about roses, except the long-stemmed, twenty-dollars-a-dozen variety obtainable in expensive florists' shops, and so could scarcely answer with any show of intelligence on their culture in an amateur garden. But at last the chance came when Miss Frances made a chance remark:

"They used to have a wonderful rose-garden at Pettigrew's," she informed Leila. "Perhaps your father will replant it."

"Oh, I *hope* he will!" cried Leila, with more enthusiasm than she actually felt. Then she hastily added: "I think Pettigrew's is *such* a fascinating place! And it seems to have had an interesting history. Did you know the

people well who used to live there, Miss Frances?"

"Of course I knew them well," replied Miss Frances, emphatically. "Why shouldn't I? They were relatives of mine and I used to be there quite often."

"How interesting!" cried Leila, feeling that she was at last getting a trifle nearer to the goal of her desires. "And I suppose you used to know all the people that were connected with it. Do tell me about some of them, won't you, Miss Frances? I like to know the history of a place I'm going to live in."

"But I thought you said your father was going to tear it down!" exclaimed Miss Frances, with sudden suspicion. Truth to tell, she was puzzled by the noticeable change in this young lady, from the flippant indifference of her manner a few days before to this intense interest in the history of the house she had been so anxious to see demolished.

"Well, perhaps he is," admitted Leila, somewhat abashed. Then added hopefully: "But he isn't as interested in history as I am. Do tell me a little about the people who lived there, Miss Frances!"

"Well," began Miss Frances, reassured and rather pleased at being questioned on her favorite topic, family histories, "I never knew old Judge Cotesworth. He was before my time. And Randolph, Cordelia Fletcher's father, always lived on his plantation near Beaufort till the war, and never came down this way, so I didn't see anything of him, but I used to think a lot of Lucilla Pettigrew—my, but she was a handsome woman, and a smart one, too!—and I went there a good deal during her time. She used to give the most wonderful parties; folks came to them from all over the state. I remember one where they had—"

But just at that interesting moment, there came a fretful call from the kitchen:

"Frances! *Frances!* Your greens are boiling over! Better come quick. I can't reach 'em—"

"Oh, bother!" exclaimed Miss Frances, impatiently. "That happens just about every time I get interested in anything. You'll have to excuse me, I reckon. I got to—"

Leila saw with anguish that a precious opportunity was slipping away from her, just when she was so near hearing, perhaps, exactly what she had been angling for. It was not to

be borne. She determined on a sudden bold move.

"Tell me, Miss Frances," she exclaimed, detaining that lady for a moment before she could escape, "did you ever hear of or meet, among the folks visiting there, a Bolton Lawrence—"

But she got no farther, for at the mention of that name Miss Frances's black eyes suddenly seemed almost to pop out of her head, and the tight little mouth closed tighter than ever.

"Where . . . where did you ever hear *that name?*" demanded she, in a tense whisper. "Where did you hear it?"

Leila was positively frightened at the change that had come over her hostess. What was that name to Miss Frances? How was she to explain? For once, she was totally at a loss.

"Why, we . . . I . . . er . . ." she stammered, trying to think of some explanation that would not involve divulging the whole of their mystery. But at that moment there came another irritable call from the kitchen:

"Frances! *Frances!* The water from your greens is all over the stove. If you don't come quick—"

Miss Frances stopped only an instant longer, to say:

"I . . . er . . . excuse me for being so rude, but I *must* hurry in. . . . Tell Cordelia to be careful about that drop-stitch. Good-by!" And Leila knew herself to be dismissed.

She walked slowly back to Grandma Fletcher's, excitedly reviewing the results of her afternoon visit.

"One thing's certain," she reflected. "The name Bolton Lawrence means a lot to her—but what? Too bad those old greens had to go and spoil things, but I'll warrant she wanted to get away. *She* didn't want to explain any more than I did. But oh, it's maddening to be so near hearing something, and then be cheated! Anyhow, I'll have some news for the bunch, to-night!"

CHAPTER XI

RONNY FINDS HIMSELF UP A TREE

ON the afternoon of the same day on which Leila had made her visit to Miss Frances Marvin, Ronny had planned an expedition of his own. Naomi and Enid were to play in a school basket-ball team match that afternoon, and Leila had confided to him that she was off in the direction of the redoubtable Cousin Frances, on a quest for information, so Ronny was left with time hanging heavy on his hands and he determined to put it to a good use. He had not yet been able to make much progress with Coosaw, and here was a chance to cultivate the amiable old darky's acquaintance—perhaps to some profit. Ronny went out and saddled the pony Spot, and cantered away in the direction of Pettigrew's Folly.

He found Coosaw laboriously bending over his little vegetable patch, and sat on the rickety

worm-fence, chatting desultorily with the old man. In the little cabin close by, Missouri was chanting a spiritual at the top of her lungs as she went about her work. "Ah wanta climb up Jacob's ladder!" she sang in her still sweet and strong soprano, and Coosaw, in the vegetable patch, would join in with his still powerful bass, "One ob dese days!" Outside the door of the cabin, half a dozen little black great-grandchildren tumbled and frolicked, rolling the whites of their eyes now and then at the strange boy sitting on the fence, who they knew, well enough, was soon to come to live on the old place.

"Do you know, Coosaw," suggested Ronny, after a while, "I haven't seen half this place yet, I don't believe. It's such a big old ranch—must be several hundred acres in it. Come on and walk around with me and tell me a little about it all, won't you? You see, if I've gotta live here—part of the year, at least—I want to know about it better."

Beyond a doubt, Ronny had a way with him, as the saying goes. People liked him at sight, and usually did what he requested of them, if it were possible. Coosaw was no exception.

With a broad grin and a "Yassir, Mist' Ronny!" he dropped his hoe and prepared to shuffle along at Ronny's side as they strolled over the unkempt acres of Pettigrew's Folly.

It was not Ronny's plan to allow Coosaw to perceive that he knew anything much about the history of the place. He had found that Coosaw was decidedly reticent concerning certain events at what had once been Cotesworth Hall, and realized that he would gain more information by seeming to know nothing than by seeming to know too much.

"Lived here long?" he inquired nonchalantly, as they sauntered by the ancient barns and stables and approached the river bank.

"Ah was born here, Mist' Ronny. Ain't nebber had no udder home," vouchsafed Coosaw. "Hope to die here too . . . dat is, ef yo' daddy gwine to be good nuff to keep us here."

There was something pathetic in the appeal with which the ancient darky made this statement; it touched Ronny deeply.

"Sure he will . . . that is, if *I* have anything to say about it! And Dad does pretty near anything I ask him to," declared Ronny. "You just keep on the right side of me, and you'll be all

hunky, Coosaw. I'll see that he don't turn you and Missouri off. That'd be a crime!"

Coosaw's face broke into a delighted grin at this assurance.

"Thanky, thanky-sir, Mist' Ronny! Yo' sho' is mighty kind!" he chuckled, and Ronny knew he had made Coosaw a friend for life. And, acting on this knowledge, he plunged a little deeper.

"Tell me something about the old place," he pursued, after Coosaw had pointed out where the rice-fields were once cultivated, and had showed him the ruins of the old rice-mill by the river's edge. "It's a funny old ranch, ain't it? Ever have a nice interesting murder here . . . or a good, hair-raising ghost? Oughter have at least a *ghost* in a deserted old ranch like this."

Coosaw's eyes almost bulged out of their sockets at such flippancy.

"No-sir, Mist' Ronny!" he declared earnestly. "Ah ain't nebber heared tell o' no murders here. Dey was a *quality* fambly; dey nebber had no sech goin's-on. An' as fo' ghoses, Ah nebber seen no hants, but mah son Ezra, he done 'clare once he see de old jedge ramblin' round dat second story one night, peekin' out de winder an'

a-beckonin' to him. But Ezra, he wa'n't nebber quite right in de haid; he done had a bad fall when he was little an' he ain't nebber been quite all dere sence, so we ain't pay no 'tention to *him.*"

"Tell me about the old judge," demanded Ronny, secretly delighted that at last he could switch to a subject so apropos. "Who was *he,* anyhow?"

"He old Jedge Cotesworth. He die befo' de wah an' Ah don't 'member him much. He de one built dis-here house."

They were approaching the dilapidated sun-dial shaft, as Coosaw offered this information, and Ronny hailed the last statement as an opening to get in some of the fine work he was planning.

"Did he set up this old sun-dial, too?" he questioned, indicating the fallen shaft, with his foot. "I wonder how the old thing came to be so busted up and lying 'way over here."

But at the mention of the sun-dial, Coosaw quite visibly retreated into a shell of vagueness.

"De old jedge he sho' did put up dat sun-dial, an' it stay out dar in de middle o' de lawn all dose years till de wah. Den . . . we don't know

what happen . . . old t'ing got all bust up one night. In de mawnin' we found hit layin' all roun'. Nebber *did* know, nohow, how dat old t'ing got so bust up." Coosaw removed his hat and scratched his woolly head, and was for moving along to other scenes. "Yo' ain't seen de stables yit, Mist' Ronny. Don't yo' wanta see whar de old jedge kep' all his horses? Dey say he had 'bout twenty racers, one time."

But Ronny was not interested, just then, in the judge's race-horses. He had at last led up to the subject of the dial, and there he intended to stick for a while. Deliberately he sat down on the fallen dial shaft and mopped a perspiring forehead.

"I'm too hot to go any farther just now," he declared. "Let's sit here while I cool off, Coosaw, and you can tell me a little more about this here sun-dial. I'm kinda interested in it." He motioned the old darky to sit down on the other end. But Coosaw was uneasy and plainly had no such intention. He stood, irresolutely fingering his ragged hat, while Ronny proceeded with his inquiry.

"Whatever became of the top of this thing?" questioned the boy, trying not to seem too in-

terested. "Ever hear where that got to, Coosaw? Shame to have the old thing broken up that way."

"No-sir, Mist' Ronny, no one ain't nebber know whar dat old top got to. Dey done took it clean away . . . some one did. I ain't nebber see dat top to dis-here day. Miss Lucill'—she was mah missis dat time—she say to me, 'Coosaw, yo' jes *gotta* find dat top. We gotta hab dat sun-dial put straight back whar 'twas. An' Ah hunt all ober de plantation, but dere ain't no top to be found, nohow. Miss Lucill' she was right smart mad at me, but Ah ain't nebber found dat top yit, Mist' Ronny."

It was plain to be seen that Coosaw was simply beating about the bush, keeping as far away as possible from the real truth. Whether or not he actually knew what had happened to the dial plate, Ronny could not guess; but that he knew *something* that he was keeping back was perfectly evident to the astute son of the Shoe King. And Ronny had heard enough of the story, from the girls, to suspect what it might be. But Coosaw was by now becoming so uneasy that the boy decided it might be very unwise to press the matter, just at this time.

So when Coosaw remarked that ef Mist' Ronny would scuse him, he better be gittin' back to his work, Ronny let him go without any further probing.

And when he had gone, Ronny rambled off by himself, to meditate upon his unsuccessful afternoon and speculate as to how it was best next to tackle the old darky on the subject. At some distance from the house, Ronny discovered an ancient live-oak whose lower branches hung so near the ground that he was able to hoist himself up by them and climb higher among the foliage. And as he had no mind to return to Grandma Fletcher's just yet, he swung himself up to a branch and sat looking out over the river.

"Gee! it's tough that I can't make that old Coosaw talk a little more!" he reflected, chewing on a green twig. "Gotta handle him different, somehow, to make him give up what he knows. Wonder how Dad would go about it."

He was studying this problem from a number of angles, when suddenly his attention was attracted by several of Coosaw's little great-grandchildren who had come trailing along the river bank, chattering their almost incompre-

hensible jargon. Three of them were girls of eight to ten, clad in faded, ragged dresses, their many pigtails sticking out at every conceivable kinky angle from their woolly heads. One bright-eyed little boy of four was being dragged along, protesting, in their wake.

They came to a halt directly under Ronny's tree, where he, hidden in the foliage above, was quite unperceived by them. And as, out of idle curiosity, he thought he'd watch them unseen, and see what they would do, he made no move and said no word.

"Les' play house! Les' play house!" shrieked the youngest girl. The rest all joyfully agreed except the little boy, who tearfully protested that he didn't want to play house, but elected to go swimming. He was, however, overruled by the rest of the party and sent back howling to his own cabin. When he was well out of the way, the three girls proceeded to "play house," after the fashion approved by all childhood, and sent the youngest to "go dig up the table." This, Ronny gathered, had to be buried near by to keep it safe from their older brother, who seemed to have discovered other uses for it.

The youngest child disappeared behind some

near-by bushes and returned with something round and very evidently heavy, for she staggered along with it as if it weighed a good deal. Back in the group, she dropped it suddenly and it landed on one of her sister's bare feet. Whereupon there were weeping and wailing, pigtail-pulling and mutual recrimination for several minutes.

"Golly!" chuckled Ronny, to himself, highly amused by the scene being enacted below him. "They sure are a circus, all right! . . . Thought that thing was wood, first, but it must be some kind of metal, by the heft of it. Wonder what it can be, anyhow? Must be pretty near two feet across, but it's so covered with dirt, you can't tell what it might be. . . . Now they're putting four sticks under it for legs and making it into a table. I call that pretty clever!"

The quarrel had by this time subsided, and the three children were amiably balancing the metal disk on four sticks of wood securely stuck in the ground. After which they set the improvised table with bark dishes and cups, concocted numerous mud-pie and pebble confections for imaginary food, and squabbled endlessly in their play. And all the while the boy

watched them from above, enjoying his hidden box-seat more than he had ever enjoyed any movie play or theater in the big cities.

Suddenly, as he stared at the metal disk that these children had improvised into a table, an idea flashed into his mind. What was the thing, anyhow, and where had they found it? Strange for a metal disk of that sort to be lying about a deserted hole like this! Suppose . . . just suppose they had, in their explorations, actually come across the top of the old sun-dial! It was not impossible. Stranger things than that might happen . . . often did happen!

He almost fell out of the tree as he leaned over, trying to get a better view of the children's "table," below. But by now the little darkies had it so covered with mud-pie edibles that it was quite impossible to see what the thing looked like. He decided to leap down among them, scaring them off, and grab the metal plate before they had a chance to conceal it again, but later concluded that he might as well wait till they had finished their play, watch where they hid their treasure, and dig it up after they had gone home.

And to this plan he stuck, though it was hard

now to restrain his impatience when something so vitally important was in view. Suppose it really were the sun-dial plate! The main quest in this curious mystery would have proved successful. He would have the honor of having made the most important discovery, and would, no doubt, be able to straighten out the rest of the tangle without any very great difficulty. He pictured himself burying the disk in some new spot, unknown to these little black imps, keeping the girls guessing wildly all evening as to what important discovery he had made that day, and at last, on the morrow, leading them in triumph to his hiding-place and disclosing the wonderful find.

"Suffering Pete! Will those kids never get out!" he almost moaned aloud, as the little negroes continued to play and squabble and make up and play again. "It'll be supper-time before they get through and it'll be dark, and I'll be late for Mrs. Fletcher's dandy hot biscuits!"

He began to think they were going to remain there all night, and the sun was drawing steadily nearer the horizon, when the shrill musical call of the youngsters' mother warned them it was time to abandon their play. In a fever of

excitement, Ronny watched them clear their improvised table, carry it over to the bushes, and lightly cover it with sand and leaves. And when they had at last disappeared from view, in the direction of their own cabin, he slid down from his perch, darted into the bushes and unearthed his find, and carried it out to clearer daylight. It was even heavier that he had supposed.

But when he had dropped it, rubbed the earth from both sides with his handkerchief, and breathlessly examined his discovery, he rose from his knees, uttered a thoroughly disgusted grunt, and kicked at the unoffending piece of metal where it lay.

"My hat!" he exploded. "And I wasted all my valuable time for this! Don't know what it is, but looks like some old flywheel out of a piece of machinery. Probably came from that old deserted rice-mill over yonder. You can bet your Aunt Susan's boots that I ain't going to let on to the girls what a guy I made of myself *this* afternoon!"

With which reflection he whistled to Spot, and, having caught him, sprang into the saddle and disgustedly rode away.

CHAPTER XII

ONE DRAMATIC DAY

THE lure of a perfect early-spring morning on the South Carolina coast! Ronny couldn't resist it. He stood on the edge of the bluff after breakfast and sniffed the fragrant salt breeze blowing in from the ocean, over the marsh islands. The river was an intense blue. The tide was high and every indented cove or "skid," as it was called, was filled to the brim. A mocking-bird trilled a complicated melody in a near-by clump of palmettos.

"Golly!" he muttered aloud, cramming his hands into his pockets. "This is the day I'd like to get out on the water."

"What did you say?" demanded Naomi, coming up suddenly behind him.

"Can't we get out on that river?" he queried in reply. "I'm just crazy to. Ain't there a boat of any kind a feller could use around here? I can sail. I used to have a cat-boat on Long

Island Sound. My tutor taught me how to handle it."

"We haven't any boat at the house here, but I could borrow Mr. McAllister's dinghy, around in the next cove," exclaimed Naomi, suddenly enthusiastic. "It's Saturday. Let's all go out in her and spend the morning. I know Grandma won't mind if Enid and I go, because we did all her marketing yesterday afternoon. We often borrow the boat, Enid and I, and sometimes spend the whole day in her."

"Hooray!" shouted Ronny, and brought on a fit of asthmatic coughing as he galloped back to the house to impart the good news to Leila and Enid, who were sitting on the piazza.

Half an hour later, armed with some sandwiches, against possible future hunger, they were tumbling into the little boat from Mr. McAllister's wharf. Ronny had proposed to take command, himself, but Naomi suggested:

"Better let Enid and me do the sailing. We know the coast here, and the wind is often pretty treacherous. You can't always count on what it will do, even on a mild morning like this. And we know the channels, too. They're tricky. Now, where would you like to go?" But, as to

this, Ronny and Leila had conflicting ideas.

"I want to sail out past Deer Island and see what the shore across the river is like," announced Leila.

"And I want to sail up along our shore, to Pettigrew's Folly," said Ronny. "I've always wanted to see what it's like from the water."

"Tell you what," Naomi settled it, "we'll do both. But we'll go around Deer Island and across the river first, for there's no telling how long this wind will hold. It may drop completely and leave us in the lurch, or it may blow a gale, and be rather dangerous for us. Either way, it will be better to be near home if a change comes." And she steered the boat around the nearest marsh island and headed for the broad channel that led past Deer Island, thick with palmetto growth, and the wide reaches of the river beyond.

The long morning wore away, bringing utter content to the four aboard the little dinghy. For the time being they had entirely forgotten their problem, the absorbing mystery that had so held them for days past. Once only, during the morning, Leila referred to the subject and was promptly suppressed by Ronny, who de-

clared himself too interested in some new points of sailing that he was learning from Naomi to give his mind to anything else. At eleven o'clock they anchored under the shade of some overhanging palmettos on the opposite shore to eat the sandwiches they had brought.

"The wind's dropping!" suddenly announced Enid, biting into her third sandwich.

"And—my patience! but it's *hot!*" sighed Leila, wiping her perspiring face with an inadequate wisp of a handkerchief.

"I don't quite like the look of things, somehow," said Naomi, laying aside an unfinished sandwich, directing Ronny to pull up the anchor, and hauling in her slack sheet. "I think we'd better be getting across while we can. If the wind dies out completely, we're good for a long hot afternoon over here, miles from home."

With a sail that flapped forlornly at more and more frequent intervals, or filled unexpectedly with some fitful breeze, they gradually worked their way across. Naomi was hopeful of making their own cove before the wind died completely, as she now predicted it would; or at least some point near enough for them to

beach the boat and get home to dinner. For they knew that by that time Grandma Fletcher would begin to be very much worried if they did not appear.

But they had not made their own cove, nor approached anywhere near it, when every vestige of breeze died away and they were becalmed on a glassy sheet of water about half a mile off the point of Deer Island.

"Can't we pole this thing back?" asked Ronny. "Or scull it with an oar, from the back? I've done that lots of times on the Sound."

But search revealed no pole in the boat, and only a broken oar-handle without any blade.

"It's too deep here to pole, anyway," asserted Naomi. "I reckon we're good for the afternoon now, the way things look. Where are the rest of those sandwiches?"

For over an hour they sat in the blazing sun, unprotected, and there was no promise of relief. Naomi was in hopes of sighting a passing motor-boat and getting a tow. But no motor-boat passed. Patience was worn out, at last, and tempers were beginning to grow short, when Leila suddenly exclaimed:

"Look at those clouds over there! They sure

are the blackest things I've ever seen!" All looked where she pointed, and, after one glance, Naomi, without a word, began to loosen the peak-halyard and a moment later the sail dropped half-way to the deck.

"Hurry and let's get it reefed!" she commanded. "Everybody help. There's going to be a big blow, soon. We can't have this sail so big. The wind will probably drive us on our own shore, but much farther up. I'm going to try to steer. The rest of you get into shelter the best you can and hold fast!"

Naomi tried to speak calmly, but her cheeks were white and her eyes wide with apprehension. The others sensed her nervousness and without a word hurried to do as she directed. Ronny and Enid gave expert service, but Leila's attempts were so awkward that they only created confusion, so Naomi assigned her to the task of coiling the sheets. The air was lifeless, the sky brassy, the water oily, and the inky clouds rose perceptibly till all the western sky was massed solid with their bulk.

Then suddenly there was a ripple across the glassy river and a faint puff of wind caused the boom to swing lazily out-board.

"Now!" cried Naomi, gripping the tiller and clutching the sheet. "Look out, everybody! I think it's coming—and coming quick! We'll head up the shore; I don't dare to steer straight in. It would wreck us to land that way."

Another puff and they began to slip quietly over the surface of the still scarcely ruffled water, toward their own shore. Back of them, stretched clear across the zenith of the sky, was an ink-black mass of cloud, edged with a narrow rim of white. An eerie twilight enveloped them and there was an ominous hush that had silenced every bird voice. Nearer and nearer they edged toward the shore, the fitful puffs alternately bellying and slacking their tiny handkerchief of a sail—and still the blow did not come. Down at the bottom of the boat, below the shelter of the free-board, Leila, Enid, and Ronny crouched, at Naomi's command, for it was impossible to tell at what instant the hurricane would strike. And at the tiller Naomi sat with strained, expectant look, alternately gaging the distance to the shore ahead and glancing over her shoulder at the terrifying mass of clouds behind. The wait of expectancy became an absolute ache to them all.

"I think we're going to make it!" breathed Naomi, presently, as the boat slipped nearer and nearer, in its diagonal course, to the bluff-lined shore. "Ronny, pull up the center-board, quick! It's very shallow here; there's a bar. Enid, have the anchor ready to throw out. Everybody jump out and wade ashore the minute we ground! We'll have to get our feet wet. We shan't have a second to spare."

Ronny and Enid sprang to do her bidding and a moment later they felt the keel grate softly on the bar.

"Quick! *quick!*" shrieked Naomi. "Here it comes! *Jump!*" With the force of a cannon-shot the hurricane struck them. Leaving the little sail-boat to its fate, they all leaped over the side, and, driven like leaves before a winter blast, hurled themselves to dry land. Hardly could they keep upright before the terrific force of the wind, and they scrambled out on the sand bent double, soaked and breathless. But the shock of the first impact was as nothing compared with what was still to come. Blinded, stung by the sand and pebbles that rained around them, they would have groped for further shelter had not Naomi's brusque command,

"Lie down—*flat!*" and a perceptible increase in the force of the wind that made any other course impossible, sent them all prone in the sand.

How long they lay thus, they could not have told. Sand, pebbles hurtled over them and once, at a cry from Enid, they looked up to see their little sail-boat, its mast snapped off short, rolled in to the beach, turning over and over like a child's toy, and landed, a mass of splintered wreckage, up against the steep bluff, not many yards from where they lay.

"Well, that's that!" shrieked Ronny. "Never mind. Dad'll pay for it!" But nobody heard him. Then there came a momentary lull. Naomi had been looking for it.

"Let's scramble up into that gully over there," she shouted to the others. "We'll be safer there, and more sheltered. Better go while we can. It isn't over yet."

They staggered to their feet and made a mad dash for the comparative shelter of a shallow gully near by, where a part of the bluff had been eaten into by the river or washed away in some such storm as the one that was now raging. No sooner had they reached it than the wind swooped down with even greater violence than

They made a mad dash for shelter

before. But screened by the sides of the gully, they were protected from the worst onslaught and could at least breathe and see with a certain amount of ease.

They had no sooner reached this refuge, however, than a torrent of rain burst upon them. Not in separate drops did it seem to come, but in a solid sheet, drenching, deluging, and blinding them anew. And an artillery of thunder and lightning flashed, crashed, and roared its terrifying accompaniment. Leila, who was desperately afraid of lightning, hid her face on Naomi's shoulder and shook with wordless, helpless terror. And at this crucial moment there was the sound of something slipping, sliding, hurtling down the face of the bluff. And in another instant a dark bundle of some nature rolled down the side and landed directly at their feet.

Startled beyond all expression by this latest development, they touched the wet and muddy mass, to find it the living body of a human being, a woman; that was all they could tell in the blackness and confusion and drenching torrent of rain. A whimpering sob reassured them that the person was conscious. Naomi put her

arm under the limp head that was lying face down on the ground and raised it, peering at the features in an effort to see who it might be. The head fell against her shoulder and a pair of great black eyes opened wide and stared at her.

"It's . . . it's *Cousin Frances!*" Naomi shrieked at the others. "However did she get *here?*"

But there was no answer to this riddle, as Cousin Frances herself was still utterly incapable of connected speech, even had she been able to make herself understood above the roar of the elements. She was plainly in pain from some injury received in her fall, and moaned frequently and muttered something about her ankle being twisted.

A few moments later the wind began to slacken. The rain still poured in torrents, but the thunder and lightning had decreased and the violence of the storm was undoubtedly over.

"Let's get out of here," said Naomi, now that they could hear themselves speak. "The worst is over now. These hurricanes never last long, but they're terrible while they do. I wonder where we are and how we're going to get Cousin

Frances home. How'd she ever come to be here, anyhow?"

But at this, Cousin Frances herself seemed to come to full consciousness of her surroundings.

"You ought to know; you're not far from Pettigrew's Folly!" she groaned, rolling out of Naomi's arms and trying to get to her feet. Then, at a twinge of very real pain, she collapsed again. "I walked up here this morning because I wanted to get hold of Missouri and see if she'd come to-morrow and do a day's work for me. She's old . . . and not much help . . . but I couldn't think of any one else. It was such a nice morning and I thought it would be a pleasant walk.

"It was getting black when I left her cabin," Cousin Frances continued, "but I just had to hurry home because I'd left Brother Ben there all alone and he's so helpless with his rheumatism, and I thought I could get back before the worst came on. But the blow struck just as I came along the road above here, on the bluff, and I couldn't see where I was going. Some sand had blown into my eyes, too, and more'n half blinded me. And all of a sudden that biggest gust hit me and I stumbled and fell and

rolled right down here before I could stop myself. I think I've twisted my ankle. It hurts terribly if I move."

She did not ask how the young folks came to be where they were, exhibiting not the slightest curiosity as to why she had rolled almost into their laps at this most unlikely spot. Cousin Frances was a person of one idea, and her own troubles quite absorbed her at present.

"Well, there's just one thing to do now, I think," announced Naomi, capably taking charge of the affair. "We must get Cousin Frances back to Pettigrew's, somehow or other, and then some one must go to Burton and send a car here to get her home. It'll never do for her to try to walk, with a twisted ankle. Do you think you can make the house, Cousin Frances, if we lift you along the best we can?"

"I reckon it's the only way I'll get there!" was her brief reply, and the four young people set to work with a will to drag her up the steep face of the bluff, choosing a spot that seemed possible of ascent.

Of the comparatively short journey to Pettigrew's Folly with their almost helpless burden, the four scarcely liked to think for a long while

afterward. The injury to Cousin Frances's ankle was no imaginary or even slight matter and her suffering was acute. And as she was not one to conceal her feelings, the progress to the tumble-down plantation house was a harrowing experience for all concerned. But at last they arrived and soon she was resting on a mattress brought from Missouri's cabin and placed on the floor of one of the great empty lower rooms.

Naomi decided that she would stay with Miss Frances while the other three made what speed they could on foot to Burton and secured a car to take home the two who remained. All were drenched to the skin, disheveled, and dirty, after their morning, but no one thought of that. As the storm had passed and the sun was out hot and bright again, the three who walked would presently be dry, and Missouri declared she would see to the comfort of Naomi and Cousin Frances.

Something over an hour later, two cars appeared, driven by two obliging and sympathetic neighbors in the town. In the larger one Cousin Frances was placed under the care of the doctor, who had driven over to be of assistance.

And into the other, Naomi climbed, joining Ronny and Enid, who had returned for her, and were now clad in dry clothes.

"Grandma was nearly frantic," Enid informed her sister. "She was certain we had capsized and drowned in the river. She's almost sick from anxiety. And she put Leila to bed because Leila was pretty nearly all in, too, and looked as if she might be going to be sick. Ronny's all right, and the rain didn't seem to give him a bit of asthma."

"That's 'cause I wasn't scared," declared Ronny. "I kinder enjoyed it, But, say! We got something to tell you when we get back." Then he added in a whisper, glancing at the broad back of Mr. Tripp, who was driving the car, "But it'll have to keep till then!"

It was considerably later, after Naomi had been rejoiced over and re-clothed and fed by Grandma Fletcher, that, around Leila's bed where the three had assembled, Enid and Ronny had an opportunity to enlighten Naomi concerning the mysterious remark Ronny had made in the car coming back.

"Enid'll tell you," he insisted, on being questioned by Naomi. "She's the one who ought to."

And, on being pressed to explain, Enid answered:

"You'll never guess in the world. It's the most wonderful piece of luck I've ever heard of! We were walking along the road by the edge of the bluff, when, just before you leave the grounds of Pettigrew's, we passed that enormous live-oak . . . you know . . . the one that's always hung 'way out over the bluff and the river. And the storm must have just uprooted that great big old tree, for there it lay, tumbled 'way down over the bank and with the roots all turned up and exposed and a great hole where the earth and everything had slid down the bank with it.

"We were so surprised," she went on, "that, in spite of being in such a hurry, we just had to go over and look at it a minute. And while we were staring down into the hole that had been made, I spied a queer round thing about as big as a dinner-plate lying there in the hole and I couldn't leave till I'd scrambled down to get it. I pretty nearly slid into the river doing it, but I got it finally and Leila and Ronny dragged me back safely. The thing was covered with dirt and sand, but when I'd brushed it off, I thought there was something very queer and

familiar-looking about it. And suddenly Ronny gave a whoop and . . . Naomi . . . what *do* you think it was?"

Naomi shook her head, but Enid went on without waiting for a reply:

"Why, the top of the sun-dial—*our sun-dial!* It must have been buried there by that old tree a long, long time!"

The announcement was so astonishing that Naomi gasped. Finally she managed to stammer:

"And . . . and what did you do with it?—leave it there?"

"Indeed we didn't!" declared Enid. "We brought it home, wrapped in Ronny's sweater. It's lying in his bureau drawer now. When we get a chance, we'll wash it off and show it to you. I reckon *now* you think we've had *some* adventure!"

"I surely do," sighed Naomi, "but you're not the only ones. I made a discovery or two, myself, in the short time you were away!"

CHAPTER XIII

A CONFERENCE WITH COOSAW

IT was the following morning, Sunday, and Grandma Fletcher and Naomi had just returned from a call on Cousin Frances, who was confined to her bed with the sprained ankle which had resulted from her tumble over the bluff, the day before. When Grandma Fletcher had disappeared into the kitchen to superintend Hagar with the Sunday dinner, Naomi was captured and led away by the three other young people and guided down to a secluded nook below the bluff where they could be well out of sight of the house. There they seated her on an old overturned boat, and Ronny pulled something out from beneath it and laid it in her lap.

"Time you got a squint at this!" he announced. "There hasn't been a minute to show it to you till this morning, and then you had to go off calling on that old lady who made such a nuisance of herself yesterday." His tone was rather injured and Naomi giggled unfeelingly.

"Well, I couldn't help myself, could I?" she said. "Grandma wanted to go and see her, of course, and it was only decent for me to go too, and ask how she was. And besides, if you knew what I know, you wouldn't think she'd made quite as much of a nuisance of herself yesterday. Poor thing! she couldn't very well help it, anyhow."

"What do you know?" they demanded in chorus.

"I want to look at this first, and then I'll tell you," was all she would vouchsafe, turning over the heavy metal disk in her lap and regarding curiously the markings on its face. Ronny had cleaned and scoured it for hours the night before, and its markings were now easily deciphered.

"No doubt about it's being *our* dial, is there!" exulted Naomi. "Here's the motto around the edge in those queer old English letters: *'My shadow marks the appointed hour. None other doth the secret hold.'* I wish we knew what that meant!"

"Well, we're going to find out!" declared Ronny, with such positiveness that the others, all in one breath, demanded, "How?"

"I ain't doped that out," he replied, "but we've taken the biggest step yet, in finding it at all. And if it hadn't been for that old hurricane, maybe we never would have. *Somebody* buried it there, and I'd give my hat to know who did. It may have been old Coosaw. I somehow think he's the likeliest one. And, then again, he mayn't know a thing about it. But I'm going to find that out before I'm many days older. One thing I'm dead certain of, though: the secret, whatever it is, has to do with *this* part of the sun-dial and not the shaft that's lying out on the bank. 'Cause why? They left that part there and didn't care any more about it, and this part they took all the trouble to hide so carefully. Simple, ain't it?"

"But, Ronny," questioned Naomi, "what *can* be so mysterious about this? It's simply a solid piece of metal,—bronze, I should think,—about an inch thick, engraved on one side with the time-marks and motto, and with the pointer attached to throw the shadow. Just to look at it, the thing is about as *un*-mysterious as any object I've ever seen!"

"What's 'the appointed hour'? That's what I'd like to know?" demanded Ronny. "The

motto's mysterious, if nothing else is. I'm going to try my wits on that for a while. And, meantime, we'd better keep this hidden somewhere. Later on, we might ask your grandma about it, but not just yet. . . . But, say, Naomi, I thought you had something to tell us, too."

"Yes, I was just wondering when you'd think to ask about it," smiled Naomi. "It's pretty nearly as important as this sun-dial, too, I reckon. It happened yesterday, when you-all left me alone with Cousin Frances in that big old room of Pettigrew's Folly. Missouri had got her comfortable with some dry blankets and had gone to make her a cup of hot tea, in the cabin, leaving me alone with her. I think she must have half fainted from the pain in her ankle, as she lay there on the mattress, for her eyes were closed and her face was very white and the hand I held was very cold. Suddenly she opened those big black eyes and looked around in a dazed sort of way and muttered, *'Bolton,* are you here?'

"You can imagine, I fairly jumped when she said that name. But I leaned over her and asked if she wanted any one specially. She stared at me a minute, and I don't think she recognized

me at all. Then she sort of did and answered: 'It . . . it made me think of some one I knew very well, years and years ago . . . being here, in this old house. It was the last time I ever saw him . . . here.'

"And then I made up my mind on the instant that I wasn't going to let this chance slip, so I just boldly asked her right out, 'Was it *Bolton Lawrence,* Cousin Frances?' She lifted herself right up and stared at me, though it must have hurt her ankle awfully to do it. 'How did you know?' she asked as she fell back groaning with pain.

"I told her I didn't know, but I had heard the name and when she said 'Bolton,' I thought it must be the same person. 'Well, it was,' she answered. 'I can't imagine where you ever heard the name, for no one ever mentions it around here. I . . . I was engaged to him at one time, when I was a very young girl, before the war. It was a secret; we had not announced it and nobody knew. But I suddenly discovered . . . he was a Yankee sympathizer. I couldn't bear it and I broke the engagement. He . . . he went away . . . North . . . right afterward. No one here ever saw him again. I . . .

I don't know why I'm telling you this. I . . . feel very weak. . . . I hardly know what I'm saying.'

"And then she sort of slipped off into another unconscious spell and I rubbed her hands and bathed her face, but she didn't speak again till Missouri brought the tea, and then she seemed to have forgotten all about what she'd said and didn't mention it again. And, of course, neither did I. That's all."

"Whew-w-w!" breathed Ronny, pursing his lips in a prolonged whistle. "I'll have to hand it to you, Naomi. You made as big a discovery as we did with the dial. Bigger, in some ways. I begin to see daylight on a whole lot of things that were as thick as mud before. Now I gotta scheme. I'm going to ride over to Pettigrew's Folly all by my lonesome, this afternoon, and have a chin with old Coosaw, if you girls'll lend me one of the ponies. Don't ask me what I'm going to dig out. Just wait till I get back!"

And at that moment they heard the tinkle of Grandma's bell, announcing that dinner was on the table.

According to plan, Ronny saddled Spot, that afternoon, and, while the girls were all loung-

ing on the piazza in couch-hammock and easy-chairs and Grandma Fletcher was taking a nap, he cantered away toward Pettigrew's Folly, through the pine barrens. When he reached the grounds of the old mansion, however, he did not halt as usual by the veranda steps, but ambled around to the quarters and dismounted at old Coosaw's cabin.

Before he had quite reached there, however, he halted in the shelter of some japonica bushes that screened the path, peered through the branches at the scene before him, and listened. It was a typical Sunday afternoon scene in the colored quarters that he saw through the branches. Before the door of the little lopsided whitewashed cabin sat Coosaw and Missouri and their assembled progeny to the third and fourth generation. All were decked in the bright-colored crude finery that they always donned for the day. Missouri's head was wound with a blue bandana turban instead of the usual white one which she wore during the week. Old Coosaw had on an ancient suit of black, several sizes too large for him. Around them were grouped their sons, daughters, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren who occupied the other

tumble-down cabins in the row. And from the group there floated out the wild, sweet strains of a "spiritual," the sacred melody so dear to the negro heart:

"Ah wants to climb up Jacob's ladder, one o' dese days!
Ebery little rung is anudder step higher, one o' dese days!"

Ronny listened with an ecstatic expression on his pale little face, for he dearly loved music, and these weird and unusual songs particularly appealed to him. Not till the last note had died away did he emerge from the screen of bushes and reveal himself to the group.

"Hello, Coosaw!" he greeted the old colored man, who rose courteously to receive him. "Don't get up, any of you. Go on with the singing, won't you? I love to hear it and I came up hoping you'd be singing, like the first day we saw you here. You don't mind my sitting here and listening, do you?"

The old man assured him they would all be delighted to go on, if it entertained him, and asked what particular spiritual he would care to hear.

"Sing that one about 'Dry bones,' won't

you?" begged Ronny. "That's a crackerjack, all right!"

And so the dark chorus, led by Coosaw's strong, full bass, broke into the melodious swing:

"Dry bones in de valley, ma-a-h Lawd!
What yo' gwine do wid dese dry bones, ma-a-h Lawd?"

And after that they gave him "Deep River," "Get on board dat royal vessel," "Swing low, sweet chariot," and a number of others that were new to the boy. And when the curious concert was over and they had all drifted away to their respective cabins except a few round-eyed black youngsters, and even Missouri had gone inside, Ronny was at last left almost alone with Coosaw. It was then that the boy opened up the subject that was uppermost in his thoughts, by asking the old colored man if he had seen the great tree that had been torn from its moorings at the edge of the bluff by the storm of the day before. Coosaw said that one of his sons had reported the fact to him, but that he had not yet gotten over to see it, himself. Ronny suggested that they walk over then

and survey the ruins, and Coosaw politely agreed and accompanied him.

"Dat was a fine old tree!" sighed Coosaw, surveying the ruins. "A grand old tree. Dey says hits been here sence long befo' de mansion was built. Ah hates to see dat tree gone." With veiled but keenly speculative gaze Ronny watched the old darky as Coosaw talked. He was trying to gage just how much Coosaw knew or was trying to hide about matters connected with this tree. Apparently he was quite unaware of any connection it might have with the mystery of the sun-dial. Suddenly the boy decided on a bold move.

"Have you ever heard of anything being buried by the roots of this tree, Coosaw?" he asked quietly. The old colored man turned on him a startled look. Then he shook his head and stared once more into the excavation.

"No-sir! No-sir! How come you' ask sich a queer question as dat? Ah nebber hear no sich fool t'ing as dat. Somep'n buried by dis-here tree! What yo' mean, Mist' Ronny?" But the keen-eyed little fellow had learned one thing he wanted to know, in that first startled, questioning gaze of Coosaw. He pursued his line of

attack with a sure insistence that would have done credit to his successful father.

"No use trying to bluff me, Coosaw," he went on, still with an air of assurance. "I know a whole lot more about this affair than you think, and so do the girls. We found the top of that old sun-dial, ourselves, yesterday, and took it home. And we all have it pretty well doped out that you knew it was here—probably hid it here yourself with the help of Mrs. Pettigrew, the night you and she took the sun-dial to pieces."

It was a wild shot and Ronny knew it, but it had an astounding effect on the ancient colored man. His kinky gray wool seemed to rise on his head, his eyes bulged in their sockets, and his chin fairly trembled as he stammered shakily:

"How . . . how yo' know dat, Mist' Ronny?"

"Because I've got my eyes and my brains about me," vouchafed the boy. "Didn't you come here yesterday after the storm and try to find the dial face?" Coosaw nodded miserably. "I guessed as much," said Ronny. "And didn't you and Mrs. Pettigrew hide it here that night, so many years ago?" he went on relentlessly.

Poor Coosaw realized that it was useless to try to conceal things any longer.

"Ah . . . Ah hid it myself," he admitted. "Miss Lucill' she done told me to bury hit dar, an' she watch me while Ah dig it deep so no one nebber find it. Ah cain't reckon how yo'-all found hit out, but dat's de Gawd's trufe, Mist' Ronny!"

"I know it is," said Ronny, "and while you're about it you might as well tell me the rest, because it may help straighten out a whole lot of things that are kinder mixed up now. I figure you'd rather tell it to me than to my dad, wouldn't you?—or maybe to the judge in a court?"

This last was another wild shot, but its effect on Coosaw was tremendous. An ignorant horror of all processes of legal justice was his, and he would rather have been flayed alive than be forced to appear before any kind of court.

"Oh, Mist' Ronny, Ah'll tell yo' eberyt'ing, Ah sho' will; only don't yo' go tellin' on me to yo' daddy nor no jedges. Miss Lucill' she done mek me promise Ah ain't never tell what happen dat night, an' Ah ain't never would, only yo' done found it all out, anyhow."

"Well, you'd better get it off your chest right away," Ronny assured him. "Come along over where we can sit down and talk comfortably. We'll sit on that old marble sun-dial shaft by the river, farther along, 'cause we would likely be interrupted here. And just remember this, Coosaw: my father's aiming to buy this place and if he does, he's likely to keep you and Missouri around here and give you plenty to do. And all your folks, too. So it might be a good idea to make a clean breast of it and get the thing straightened out. Kinder be more comfortable for you all. Get me?"

"Yassir, Mist' Ronny," and Coosaw nodded again. Then they made their way to the marble pillar lying on the edge of the bluff. And for an hour or two the two sat there, absorbed in the strange conference, till by the level rays of the sun, across the river, Ronny was warned that he should be making his departure. And when he and the old colored man had corralled the pony and Ronny was astride of Spot, he turned to Coosaw and said:

"You're a good old sport, Coosaw, I have to hand it to you! You won't regret what you've told me to-day. Keep it under your hat, though,

and don't let on to another soul yet what's up. So long!"

And he galloped away toward the pine barrens, the old darky gazing after him in half-scared, half-admiring amazement.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

WHEN Ronny turned in at Grandma Fletcher's gate, he was met by Enid, who came flying out at his approach.

"You'll never guess what's happened!" she cried as he flung his leg over the saddle. "Your father's come back!"

"What?" he shouted. "Dad? Golly! this *is* a surprise! When did he come?"

"Just a little while ago. He got into Savannah this afternoon, by train, and drove right out. He has a young man with him, a Mr. Carter."

"Gee whiz! Did he bring Alan down, too? That's his secretary. He's a jim-dandy, Alan is! I'm awful fond of him. He used to be my tutor. Let's hurry in."

They went into the house and there was a joyful and demonstrative meeting between father and son and the young secretary, Alan Carter, a quiet, bright-eyed young fellow who

seemed to have a real affection for Ronny. Mr. Speer declared that he had returned to settle up affairs finally and definitely in regard to Pettigrew's Folly and had found it advisable to bring his secretary to assist in that and some other complicated business matters he had to attend to in the South. He expressed himself as very much pleased with Ronny's improvement in health during his absence and congratulated Grandma Fletcher and the girls on their careful guardianship of his two children. Then he subsided into his own thoughts and took no part in the general conversation that evening.

It was not till later in the evening, when supper was over, Grandma Fletcher out spending an hour with her next-door neighbor, and Mr. Speer and his secretary closeted in one of the bedrooms, discussing business, that Ronny had a chance to have a conference with the girls. The young people were drawn up as usual around the open fire, when Ronny electrified them all by announcing:

"Well, I hit something pretty deep this afternoon! Old Coosaw's confessed to me all he knows, and if it's all true, I figure we got to make a change in our tactics and get some out-

side advice in this business. I don't know how you feel about it, Naomi and Enid, because it was your secret to begin with, and you got the say-so about it, but I strongly advise taking Alan into this. He's a good sport, all right, and he knows a lot and I'd trust what he says as soon as if it was Dad."

"But why not tell your father right away?" suggested Naomi. "After all, he's the one that's going to buy the place, and he ought to know if there's anything strange about it."

"That's true, too," said Ronny, "but I happen to know that Dad's about up to his eyes in a whole lot of things down here that haven't so much as a speaking acquaintance with this. In fact, buying this place is about the last thing in importance on the list, except that he wants it to please me. There are some phosphate mines in Florida that he's got to light right out day after to-morrow to see about, and I don't know what all. He's going to leave Alan here to finish up this business, while he goes on. So you see, he hasn't got much spare time to wrastle with a tangle here. But Alan'll be keen about it, and I know you're going to like him. What do you say?"

"Why, if things are as you say," agreed Naomi, "I really don't see that we can do anything else. But Ronny, do tell us what you discovered from Coosaw. We're dying to know! You certainly did better than Enid or I could have done, if you got anything out of him!"

"I got the whole thing out of him," declared Ronny, "or at least as much as he knows." He described how he had led old Coosaw to give himself away, and then went on: "I asked him if he knew there was any secret about the sundial and he said yes, Miss Lucill' had told him she had discovered that there was something strange about it and had asked him one night to help her take it to pieces and see if there was anything hidden in it, somewhere. He said it was an awful piece of work to get it apart. They worked half the night with a cold chisel and hammer and crowbar, trying to get the old thing loose, and finally it came apart and Miss Lucill' poked all about it, but couldn't find anything in its insides at all, and so they just left it lying around. And then I said I supposed he and Miss Lucill' buried the other part, but I asked him just why they decided to do that.

"And right there I discovered that something

was queer about the way that old feller was acting. He sort of got confused and hesitated and got mixed up in what he was saying, and I guessed he wasn't telling me the straight story, after all, or at least that he was holding something back. He evidently didn't quite trust me, even yet. So I said: 'Look here, Coosaw, you're holding out on me. Better hand me the straight goods, for it'll all come out in the wash, you know; and if you haven't told it right, it'll be the worse for you!' That gave him another scare, so he changed his tactics and let me into another side of the yarn.

"He finally admitted to me that Miss Lucill' hadn't had anything to do with the burying of the dial plate. He'd done that all himself, after she'd gone back to the house and gone to bed. He took the dial and dug a deep hole by the live-oak and buried it, and never told a soul, then nor since, that he'd done it. He said Miss Lucill' was curious about its disappearance for a while after and asked him a lot of questions, but he'd always pretended he didn't know anything about it, and she finally forgot it. Evidently she'd never attached much importance to that top part and so wasn't concerned about

its loss. The war had come on in the meantime and she was too much occupied with other matters."

"But why should Coosaw go and bury it himself, so mysteriously?" demanded Enid. "I don't understand that at all."

"Neither did I," asserted Ronny, "and I put it right up to him. And there was where I got an entirely different twist on the whole matter. Coosaw just plain didn't want to tell me, at first. He hedged a lot and then he finally said it was because he thought that whatever secret there was about the dial was—must be—in the top part and he thought it oughtn't to be lost, as it probably would be if it was left kicking around. The quarter youngsters might get hold of it and lose it or drop it in the river. That sounded pretty thin to me, so I asked him, if he thought that, why didn't he tell Miss Lucill' and let her take care of it? Why did he go hide it that way and keep it a secret even from her?

"That got him. He saw he couldn't get around it any other way, so he blurted out that he himself knew something about the dial and he didn't want Miss Lucill' to know it. 'Why not?' I put it up to him. And his answer quite surprised me.

It was, 'Because she'd spoil everything!' Can you beat that? . . . I asked him, of course, what it was she would have spoiled, and he said he didn't know, but it was something about 'Marse Randolph.' I said to him. 'Coosaw, tell me straight: how do you know all this?' And he almost shook as he answered because his old father had told him so. I asked him was that Scipio, and he nodded. Then I asked when Scipio had told him and he said, just before the old man died.

"It seems Scipio lived about six months after the judge died, but he was never well after the accident, and finally died too from the effects of it, so Coosaw said. He must have had something on his mind, because he made Coosaw promise he'd never tell the secret and then warned him to guard the top of that sun-dial because there was something about it that would mean something to Marse Randolph some day. Scipio said he didn't dare say more because the old judge had confided in him and he was afraid the judge would come back and 'hant' him if he gave any more of the secret away. But he did tell Coosaw that if Marse Randolph ever came back to Cotesworth Hall, he (Coosaw) was to tell him

what Scipio had said and to 'look out for the sun-dial'—whatever that meant.

"Coosaw was a young boy when Scipio died, but he never forgot his father's warning and waited month after month for Randolph to come. But, as we know, Randolph never set foot in Cotesworth Hall again and finally went to the war and was killed. Then Coosaw didn't know what to do. The property had passed into the hands of Mrs. Pettigrew. Randolph's daughter (your grandmother) was a little girl living in another part of the State, and, as far as Coosaw knew, she had nothing to do with the affair, anyway, so he forgot all about the whole business after a while and simply left the sun-dial face where it was. He says he never thought of it again till the storm uprooted that old tree, yesterday. Then he remembered the old dial face and went to see if it had come to light. When he didn't find it he thought that probably it had fallen into the river, which is pretty deep right there. He planned to drag for it sometime, just to satisfy his own curiosity.

"Well, that's about all, I guess. I asked him why he's never in all these years spoken of the matter to your grandma, Mrs. Fletcher, here.

He said, 'Why, Mist' Ronny, why for I tell dat to Miss Cordelia? She only lil gal den. She ain't know 'bout sech t'ings. Dat all long ago.' . . . Oh, yes . . . and I asked him, besides, if he had ever heard what was the trouble between Mr. Randolph and his father, the old judge. Coosaw said: 'I ain't know fo' sho'. I only lil chap den.' But he did admit that Scipio had told him the old judge was right mad at his son for deliberately going off somewhere and being away the day they had the big meeting under Secession Oak. Randolph never would explain why he was away, nor what he was doing, and so the judge just jumped to the conclusion that he was a Yankee sympathizer. He said the father and son disputed about it for a long time, and it nearly broke the old judge's heart because he thought so much of his son. Then the judge met with that accident and they never did clear up the matter.

"Then I asked Coosaw if he'd ever heard of a Bolton Lawrence around here. And right there I got the shock of my life, for he said: 'Fo' sho'! Marse Bolton Larence, he de cousin o' Miss Harriet Stepney, de jedge's second wife! His home 'way off over near Cheraw, but

he often visit here for weeks at a time. Miss Harriet she right fond ob him, but de old jedge he ain't like him so much." And Coosaw ended by saying Bolton Lawrence disappeared about the time the war broke out and was never seen around here again. Said it was rumored he'd gone North.

"Well, that was about all I got out of the old man, but I leave it to you if we haven't got a pretty little puzzle here now, and about all the pieces on the table, at that!"

"Ronny," began Naomi, when the boy had finished, "it strikes me it's high time we consulted some one else about all this. It was all very well to have it for a secret and pretend we were detectives unearthing a mystery, and all that, at first, but the thing seems to me too serious to be hidden any longer. If your father weren't going right off to Florida to-morrow, I'd say to tell him, but since you think he won't want to be bothered about it, we'd better let Mr. Carter into it right away—to-night if possible. And here's something else: I think we had better tell it all to Grandma, too, and see if she can throw any light on the matter. She has never wanted to talk about her father and his

not inheriting Pettigrew's Folly; it is evidently a rather painful subject to her. But now I'm sure the time has come when she ought to know all we've discovered. It can't do her any harm, and it might clear up the muddle. Shall we tell them both to-night? I'm for not waiting another minute."

"You're dead right!" declared Ronny, thoughtfully. "I happen to know that Dad is going to bed in a few minutes, to get rested up for his trip to-morrow, and Alan will be free after that. We'd better get him out here and explain all about it."

"And here comes Grandma, now," added Enid. "I hear her step on the back gallery."

A moment later, Grandma Fletcher entered, dusting her hands together in her characteristic gesture as she approached the fire.

"My but the evening's cool!" she exclaimed. "These spring nights are more like winter, even when the days are warm. Mrs. McAllister's not at all well. I sat talking to her longer than I expected. Thought you'd all be in bed when I got back."

"Grandma," began Naomi, with a meaning glance at the others, "we've something very im-

portant to tell you, and we don't want you to be troubled by what we're going to say—"

"What's the matter?" interrupted the old lady, her tiny figure suddenly stiffening belligerently. "That possum hasn't caught another one of my chickens, has it, while I was away?"

"No, no!" laughed Naomi, "nothing like that. It's something to do with Pettigrew's Folly and a curious thing we discovered about the old sundial there. We'll tell you the whole story, and we hope that afterward you'll help us out if *you* know anything that would clear up the mystery."

And while Naomi quietly recounted all the curious train of events that had led them to the present situation, the little old lady listened, her white head leaning on her hand, her blue eyes fixed on the leaping flames. And she uttered no word of comment throughout the tale, though she flinched perceptibly a number of times when the story touched her own affairs too nearly. When Naomi had finished with the description of Ronny's discoveries that afternoon, she sat up straight, with an air of keen excitement.

"You funny children!" she exclaimed. "Why didn't you come to me sooner with all this? I

might have helped you out long ago, though I must say there are some gaps here that even I can't fill in. I *am* sensitive about that old affair of my father's, but it's only because I'm tired of the gossip and talk in this little town, that never lets an affair like that drop, no matter how old it is. There are some things you can't explain to some people, because they just won't accept the explanation, no matter how true it is. When such is the case, it's best to let the subject drop.

"My father, Randolph Cotesworth, told me a good deal about all this before he went off to the war, and I never saw him again. I was only a child,—not more than twelve,—but he was a lonely man and made a great companion of me. My mother had died when I was a small baby, and I was all he had. We were living then at his plantation up beyond Beaufort. I remember he said that so long as he lived he would never enter the old home of Cotesworth Hall again, nor even the town of Burton. He had detested his father's second wife, who was now dead, and the reason for this detestation he once confided to me.

"The judge had, rather late in life, married

this Harriet Stepney, a woman much younger than himself, and she had immediately taken a deep dislike to his son, my father, who was then a young man of nineteen or twenty. The dislike was mutual and they tried to keep out of each other's way as much as possible. Of course all this greatly distressed the old judge, and my father tried to hide his own feelings as much as possible. Harriet had a cousin who frequently visited the house, a young man named Bolton Lawrence. He seemed rather a pleasant young fellow and my father took a liking to him, though the old judge for some reason didn't. Said there was something or other about Bolton he couldn't trust.

"At any rate, the friendship between the two young men flourished, and several times my father went off to visit Bolton at his home near Cheraw. There my father met a sister of Bolton's, Anita Lawrence, a beautiful young girl with whom he became infatuated. So in love with her did he become at last, that he could think of nothing else. But, fortunately or unfortunately for him, Anita did not return his affection except to regard him as a pleasant friend. Then, he said, he was foolish enough to

confide the affair to Bolton and beg him to intercede for him with the sister. Bolton promised to do his best, but advised my father to keep away from their home for a while and give the sister a chance to know her own mind.

"One night, a month or two later, Bolton came to Cotesworth Hall unexpectedly, drew my father aside, and said that his sister had at last confessed she did care for him and had consented to a secret wedding on the following day. She wished it to be secret because she felt certain that neither the old judge nor his wife would approve of it. Bolton said that if they were to get to his home at any sort of season, next day, they must start that very night and ride all night to the nearest railway station.

"My father was simply overjoyed, of course, but had one objection to starting so soon. The next day was to be the occasion of the great meeting under Secession Oak, and he felt in duty bound to be on hand for it. Bolton, however, represented that his sister knew nothing about that, and that she had made all her preparations for the wedding and would be hurt and indignant and not understand it at all, if Randolph weren't there at the appointed time for

the ceremony. As she was very high-spirited, doubtless there would never be another opportunity.

"Well, that settled my father, of course. Between the two duties, he felt that that to Anita was the greater, and with the optimism of youth he was sure he could explain things to his father afterward. He and Bolton set out and rode all night. But, early in the morning, Bolton's horse shied at something and threw him and he seemed to have sustained an injury to his back that would prevent him from any further travel that day. He decided to rest at a plantation near by and borrow a carriage to travel home later. Meantime, he begged my father to go on, as his sister would not understand the delay and would be very uneasy.

"My father went on alone, came to the Lawrence home, and reported Bolton's accident. But he had not been in the house five minutes before he found he had been the victim of a cruel practical joke. Anita had not the faintest intention of marrying him, nor did she appear to know a thing about what had happened. She declared it must be a mean trick of her brother's, as Bolton knew perfectly well she had been en-

gaged for some time to the son of a big plantation-owner near by and expected to marry him shortly.

"Of course, my father was wildly indignant at the way he had been treated and threatened to go back and punish the brother as he deserved. But the girl begged and pleaded with him so hard to keep the matter a secret that at last he consented. She declared that if the story got about, it would probably be the cause of her having to break her engagement with this other man and would spoil her life. And as my father still cared for her, and as he was the soul of chivalry, he gave his promise to keep the secret, —even to keep his hands off her cad of a brother,—and so went back to Cotesworth Hall.

"It isn't necessary to detail the complications he found himself in when he got back, I reckon. The old judge was furious and demanded explanations, and there were no explanations forthcoming. My father longed beyond anything else to have at least a secret meeting with Bolton and tell him what he thought of him. But he learned that Bolton had gone North for an extended stay after his accident, to be treated

at a hospital in New York. Father himself never believed that the man was seriously injured; he was sure the whole affair was only a ruse to get away. But he racked his brains in vain to think of any reason for what Bolton had done. There seemed to be none, and my father went on about his life, very unhappy in his home, under a cloud with his fellow-townsmen because of his absence from the Secession Oak meeting, but hoping always that the incident would be forgotten and that he would be reconciled with his father.

"My father finally could stand the atmosphere of his home no longer and went away on a long hunting and fishing trip to the distant swamps of the Combahee River. He went alone and left no word as to when he would be back. And it was while he was away that the judge made the trip to Beaufort with Scipio and had the fatal accident when he was returning. The judge died two days later, from his injuries. I understand that they sent a slave off to the Combahee to try to find Father, but he was not successful in the search and returned without him. As a matter of fact, Father didn't return

for several weeks afterward and knew nothing of his father's death till he reached Burton. There he learned the news, and added to his grief was the shock of discovering that Cotesworth Hall had, by the terms of his father's will, been left to the wife. It was too much for my father. He turned his horse about and rode out of the town and never put foot in it or his former home again.

"By the terms of his father's will, he had inherited two other plantations in a distant part of the State and to one of these, near Beaufort, he retired to live. A year or two afterward he married a Beaufort girl, and when she died and left him with the small daughter which was myself, he lived the life of a recluse on his plantation till the war came and he went off and was killed. I was brought up afterward by relatives in Orangeburg. . . . That's his story."

Grandma sat up with a sigh when she had finished this long account, pushed back her white hair from her forehead, and made a faint dusting motion with her hands, as if to brush away these unhappy memories of the past.

"But Grandma, what about the judge's wife

and Miss Lucilla Pettigrew and all the rest?" demanded Enid, eagerly.

"Ah," sighed the old lady, "that's quite another part of the story!"

CHAPTER XV

GRANDMA FLETCHER COMPLETES THE RECORD

"IT'S a part of the story," went on Grandma Fletcher, gazing once more into the fire, "that I know very little about; I can only surmise the details. Harriet Stepney Cotesworth, of course, I never knew, personally,—she died before I was born,—but from what I've heard of her, she must have been a rather selfish, self-centered, scheming woman. People said she had the old judge wound round her little finger, although he was a very forceful personality. It was common talk that she tried in every way to influence him against his son, and I'm pretty certain now that she succeeded beyond what any one surmised.

"Anyhow, she didn't live long to enjoy Cotesworth Hall, after she'd got it, for an attack of yellow fever that was epidemic at that time in Charleston, where she was visiting, carried her off a year or so after the judge's death. By the

terms of her will, the estate went to her brother, Winfield Stepney, who lived up near Cheraw. Winfield himself did not occupy Cotesworth Hall, but gave it, a few years later, to his daughter Lucilla when she married Harvey Pettigrew, and Harvey began all those extensive alterations that were never finished. Lucilla was a brilliant and beautiful girl, but she had a good many of her Aunt Harriet's traits. The slaves who had gone with the estate did not like her, I've heard, any more than they had liked Harriet, and they all had the feeling that my father should have been the master there."

"Why, I thought Coosaw was devoted to her!" exclaimed Naomi. "He always talks as if he had been."

"I think he came to like her better after a while, and he always admired her and thought her quite a wonderful mistress, but he never ceased to regard her secretly as an interloper," replied Grandma. "I know that from things he's said to me since. And it explains, too, why he wouldn't tell her about the sun-dial and tried to conceal the dial face from her. His father, Scipio, had been the judge's personal servant. He was more in his confidence, I imagine, than

any one thought, for Scipio was an exceptionally intelligent and faithful negro.

"From what you tell me of your discoveries about the notes the judge made regarding that sun-dial, there can't be a doubt that there was some secret about it,—perhaps some secret hiding-place in it,—that he had confided to Scipio, but what, exactly, it could have had to do with my father, I can't quite see. Perhaps the judge had left some word in it that he forgave Father, or something like that. If so, I don't see why Scipio didn't give it to Father at once. It's all very puzzling. And why should Lucilla be so eager to find out the secret of the sun-dial? Of course she must have read those notes of the judge's, and she may have been in her Aunt Harriet's confidence, for she was a great favorite of Harriet Cotesworth's, it was said, but that doesn't explain why she should be so determined to learn the secret, unless she knew there had been something shady going on. It makes me suspect there *was* something out of the way, the more I think of it!" And Grandma Fletcher dusted her hands and asked if they would show her the sun-dial face, as she was very curious to see it.

Ronny brought it out and held it while she examined the piece of metal with the curious legend around its edge. Again they all had the baffled feeling that there could be nothing peculiar about so apparently simple an affair, and while they were turning it over and over and scrutinizing its surface, the door of one of the rooms opened and Alan Carter, the young secretary, came out and joined them beside the fire. They made no attempt to conceal the dial face from him, and watched while he examined the article with delighted interest.

"I've sort of a craze for sun-dials," he explained to them laughingly. "I suppose most young fellows have some hobby—fishing, or golf or baseball. Mine happens to be an absorbing interest in sun-dials. I've collected a few rare or peculiar old dial faces and have innumerable books on the subject, and some day when I'm old and have enough money, I hope to have a great garden and as many sun-dials in it as I can accumulaate! This one looks as if it might have a history, and that's a very curious legend around the edge. Do you know whether or not it has any special meaning?"

"I figure," said Ronny, glancing around the

circle, "that if Mrs. Fletcher don't mind, we'd better tell Alan all about this. He's the one who can haul us out of the muddle if any one can, and we oughtn't to lose any more time about it. . . . What do you think, Mrs. Fletcher?"

"I haven't the slightest objection," Grandma Fletcher assured him. "I think, myself, there's something here that ought to be cleared up as soon as possible, and if Mr. Carter can do it, so much the better. My! but this is as good as a detective story, isn't it!" she ended gaily, dusting her hands once more as she rose and started for the kitchen.

"I reckon this is going to take us well past midnight," she said as she returned with a large pitcher of milk and a plate heaped with cookies, "so we might as well be comfortable!"

And again, for Alan's benefit, they detailed the history of this curious sun-dial and the story of Pettigrew's Folly. And Grandma filled in many of the gaps that had been left before. Alan listened to it all in silence, except for a brief but pertinent question occasionally. When it was finished, he said:

"There are two points on which I haven't heard any comments from Mrs. Fletcher, as

yet. One concerns the secret room up on the second floor of Pettigrew's. Do you know anything about that, Mrs. Fletcher? And how do you account for Mrs. Pettigrew's knowing about it, as Coosaw says she did?"

"Oh, there is such a room there, of course," Grandma replied. "That was an open secret. All those old houses had secret rooms—or most of them did, anyway. They were used as storage-places for valuables, or hiding-places in case of need, or that sort of thing. Usually the master of the house knew of it and no one else. The judge no doubt told his wife about this one and she in turn probably had confided the secret at some time to her niece, Lucilla, who frequently paid her aunt long visits. Lucilla doubtless went over the old judge's papers and books in the years after she was left there alone. And I can imagine that when she came across those disturbing notes, she began to get rather upset. She probably bundled the whole lot of books and so forth into that trunk and shoved it into the secret room where no one would know of its existence, not even Coosaw. He says she acknowledged she knew about it and intended to tell him, sometime, where it was, but I very

much doubt that last. That's probably one of his exaggerations."

"Well, that clears up the matter of the room," remarked Alan Carter. "Now what about this Miss Frances, the cousin who had the accident yesterday? You say she confessed that she had been secretly engaged to this Bolton Lawrence till she discovered he was a Northern sympathizer. As I remember your story, Mrs. Fletcher, he seems to have dropped out of the picture completely after the episode of Randolph Cotesworth's last visit to the Lawrences' home. Did he never return to these parts after that?"

"Oh, of course he returned to his home near Cheraw, after a stay in New York, at that time," answered Mrs. Fletcher, "but he never came near Cotesworth Hall again till after the judge's death. I reckon he felt he wouldn't be a very welcome guest there. But later, when the judge was out of the way and my father had left the place for good and all, he came back and visited Harriet, and, still later, Lucilla. All that family seemed to think a great deal of him. It was then, I reckon, that he met Cousin Frances there. She was a young, impressionable girl at

the time and he must have been well over forty. He was said to be very handsome, and she probably fell in love with him. That part's all news to me. I reckon nobody knew it. The trouble was that rumors had become thicker than ever about his being a Yankee sympathizer. The war was imminent then, and feeling was high. Probably Frances didn't hear those rumors at first. And when she did, she broke it off with him pretty quick. But she must have been hard hit if she's thought about him ever since! He did go North for good, right about that time, and never returned, so far as I know."

"Then you think your Cousin Frances was in no way involved in this matter of the sundial?" questioned Alan.

"Not in the least," insisted Grandma. "She was a tiny child when the judge had all that trouble with his son, could scarcely remember the judge's wife. She was a cousin of Lucilla's husband and was invited to many of the parties at Cotesworth Hall. But otherwise she's absolutely out of it."

"Then," said Alan, thoughtfully tracing with his finger the design of the hours on the dial face, "I suspect what happened was about like

this: There was a deliberate plot on the part of Mrs. Harriet Cotesworth to influence the judge against his son, so that he would quarrel with Randolph and leave the estate of Cotesworth Hall to her. You say it was common talk that she tried to influence her husband against his son, so that's no guess, but I think she had an overmastering desire to have Cotesworth Hall, and she knew that in the ordinary course of events she wouldn't get it; it would naturally go to Randolph. As I see it, she and her cousin, Bolton Lawrence, cooked up a scheme for getting Randolph in wrong with the old gentleman. His falling in love with Bolton's sister made it easy. And the Secession-Oak meeting furnished just the occasion they needed. They knew pretty well that if the boy were not at that meeting, and were placed in such a position that he could offer no excuse, his father would probably disinherit him. It was a contemptible trick, but that seems most likely to have happened. And the judge's wife was probably at the bottom of it.

"But I'm convinced that the old judge didn't die in an entirely unforgiving frame of mind," Alan continued. "All this business about Scipio

and Coosaw and the sun-dial seems to indicate that, before the end, Judge Cotesworth relented toward his son or left some word for him, to be read after his death, or something like that. I can't quite figure it all out. Probably he entrusted it to Scipio or had Scipio hide it or something of that kind. What puzzles me is why Scipio didn't give it to Randolph as soon as the judge was gone. I don't understand the delay, nor any reason for concealing the message. However, there must have been a message, or Scipio must have *thought* there was one, or else there wouldn't have been all this mix-up about it. The only way I can see to settle it will be to try to solve the puzzle about this dial face. I'll give it a good looking over with my pocket microscope to-morrow and see if I can get any light on the subject."

"Oh, let's take an ax," cried Ronny, impatiently, "and bust the old thing up, right now! I can't wait so long to see what the answer is to all this!"

"Yes," echoed Grandma Fletcher, "why not do that? Who cares about the old dial now? We want to find out the secret at once!"

"Oh, I hope you won't insist on that!" cried

Alan Carter, with a horrified expression in his eyes. "To begin with, it might destroy everything, so that it would ruin your chances of ever finding out the secret. Then it would needlessly spoil a beautiful and curious relic. And, lastly, I'm not so sure but what this bronze would resist the stoutest ax you could find, anyway. Just give me one day on this, and I'll guarantee you some kind of answer. And if I shouldn't be successful after all, then we can resort to the ax!"

And so it was agreed. After many returns to the vexed questions of their problem, they all drifted off to bed in the wee hours of the morning. But it is safe to say that the only member of that household who really slept serenely that night, was G. T. Spear the Shoe King, who knew nothing at all about it!

CHAPTER XVI

THE SHADOW ON THE DIAL

THE hours are never so long as when one is waiting for them to pass in order that a mystery may be solved. The four young people found this to be the case on the morning after they had taken Grandma Fletcher and Alan Carter into their secret. To tell the truth, Grandma was nearly as impatient as the others. Mr. Speer had much business on his mind that morning, before he left for Florida, and Alan was kept closely shut in with him while he went over his affairs. But at last the Shoe King was driven to Hardeeville, where he was to catch the Florida express, and Alan returned to give his whole attention to the problem of the sundial.

"I've been going over this thing in my mind most of the night," he admitted to the rest, as he sat on the piazza, turning the dial round and round and carefully examining it through

his shell-rimmed spectacles. "The more I think of it, the more certain I am that we could get at the truth sooner by setting it up somewhere in the sun and watching what happens . . . or if there is any change or any peculiar feature as the hours go by . . . than by any other means. I've been over every inch of it with my microscope and discovered nothing that seemed unusual except a tiny hole, no bigger than a pin-point, here in the stylus. Whether this hole was made by accident or design, I have no means of telling. It seems to go diagonally through the surface of the stylus, for the opening on one side is just a trifle lower than on the other.

"This is a fine sunny day," he went on. "Suppose we set it up in proper position out there on the bluff, and see what, if anything, is indicated, as the hours pass, that would give us the slightest hint. I'll sit by it and watch it every minute, so that we'll miss nothing. Of course, it's past twelve now, and the morning hours are gone. We may have to wait till tomorrow morning before we discover anything, —*if* we discover anything,—but we must take a chance on that. Come along girls and boys, and help me set it up."

They all flocked out to the bluff and watched, while, in an unshadowed spot, Alan Carter set up the dial face, adjusting it with a nicety that only one versed in the ways of sun-dials could have achieved. As there was no shaft or pillar to support it, he arranged it as best he could on a packing-box. Then he brought out a chair and sat staring at it, moment after moment, his admiring audience—including even Grandma Fletcher—clustered about, waiting for results. But none were forthcoming for so long a time that presently Grandma announced that dinner must be nearly ready and that she, for one, had no more time to expend on the riddle at present. Alan asked that his dinner be brought out to him, and he ate it still staring at the dial face with unwavering gaze. After a while, as the sun was very hot, and at Alan's request, the others left him and went to sit on the piazza and await results.

It was about three o'clock when they heard Alan shout and saw him beckoning to them, and they all flocked out to the bluff once more, to his side. His face, as they approached, was wreathed in delighted smiles.

"I think I have it, now!" he exclaimed. "There's something I've been watching all this time, and now I'm almost certain I'm right, but I wanted you all to be here when I made the final test. Do you remember my speaking of the pin-hole in the stylus? Well, I noticed right away, after we had set this thing up, that there was a tiny but distinct pencil of light thrown on the shadowed part of the dial, coming directly through that hole. As the rays of the sun worked around, that shaft or pencil or light worked around too. That gave me an idea. At first I had thought the hole was an accident, that it had no bearing on the matter. Suddenly I saw that it was no accident. In that ray of light lay the solution of our mystery. At some hour, I felt sure (see the motto!), that pencil of light would strike something on the dial face—something that would solve the riddle. I was dead right, as it turned out.

"At exactly three o'clock," he stated, "the pencil hit a point right inside of the Roman three, and at that point showed up a tiny dark speck on the dial—so tiny that we've overlooked it in all our examinations. There it is; the light

hasn't quite left it yet! Look at that speck through this powerful magnifying-lens and tell me what you see."

He handed them the microscope and each one took a turn staring through it, beginning with Grandma Fletcher.

"I can't see anything very distinctly," she remarked, "but my eyesight has been dreadfully poor of late. The speck seems larger and has a sort of irregular shape. Here, Naomi, your young eyes ought to make out more."

"Oh, my goodness!" shouted Naomi. "It's a *hand* . . . a tiny, tiny hand . . . slightly raised from the surface of the dial . . . palm upward! Have you ever heard of anything so strange?"

When all had seen it, Alan said:

"Yes, it is a hand, and I haven't a doubt that it holds a secret of the dial. Press on it, Miss Naomi, with the point of my penknife, here, and see what happens, I haven't tried it yet."

Naomi took the knife and with fingers that shook with excitement, pressed the blade-point on the tiny speck. For an instant nothing happened, and there was a sigh of disappointment from her audience. Then, slowly, very slowly,

one half of the dial face began to slip around, revealing a shallow opening beneath it. As it slipped farther and farther, Ronny gave a whoop and shrieked:

"There's something in there! I see it!"

"Don't stop the pressure, Miss Naomi," warned Alan. "As soon as the opening is wide enough, I'll slide my fingers in and get what's hidden there. But I have a notion it will spring back if you remove the pressure."

Suddenly he inserted his fingers and drew out a packet or what appeared to be a long envelop folded double, and exclaimed, "Now you can let go, Miss Naomi!"

Naomi released the pressure and half of the dial face slipped back into place. So cleverly was the place of opening concealed by the markings on the dial, that none would ever have suspected there could be such a feature about it. But no one was paying any attention to that particular detail just then. They had all crowded around Alan, who held the packet in his hand, and was reading, in a hushed voice, the superscription written on it in faded ink:

" 'For Randolph Chester Cotesworth, Esquire.' "

"I think this belongs, by all rights, to you, Mrs. Fletcher," he added, handing the packet to Grandma.

She stood looking at it a minute, her eyes blurred with unshed tears. Then she put it back in his hands.

"I wish you'd look over it and read it for me," she faltered. "I'm so nervous, and I haven't my glasses here . . . and I don't think I could read it, anyhow."

He broke the seal of the envelop and spent several silent moments looking over its contents, while the others held their breath in suspense and felt like pinching themselves to see if this remarkable situation could be real. At last he looked up and spoke:

"There are two 'documents' here, Mrs. Fletcher. One is a will, dated October seventh, eighteen forty-eight. It appears to be all duly legalized and signed by 'Hannibal T. Cotesworth,' and leaves unreservedly the property of Cotesworth Hall to his son, Randolph Chester Cotesworth. It seems to have been executed at Beaufort. The other is a letter from Judge Cotesworth to his son. Do you wish me to read it to you?"

Grandma only nodded assent, being quite unable to speak. And Alan quietly read the old letter:

" 'RANDOLPH, MY DEAR SON:

" 'I have despatched the black boy, Cæsar, to find you, if possible, in the Combahee Swamps where you are hunting, but I fear I may not live to see your return. I have been mortally injured in the accident that occurred while I was returning from Beaufort.

" 'But if the worst should befall me, I want you to know that you are fully restored to my confidence. Circumstances in the past months which you either would not or could not explain, and the adverse criticism of others, influenced me to doubt your loyalty to the cause to which we men of South Carolina have dedicated ourselves. Whatever may have detained you from that meeting a few months ago, I still have no means of knowing. But in my recent trip to Beaufort I heard from many lips the highest praise of your unremitting efforts for the Cause, and I feel that I must have been mistaken in ever doubting you.

" 'I shall inclose this and another document

in a sealed envelop and leave it with Scipio to deliver to you in person on your return. He is a devoted servant and friend. Though seriously crippled, himself, with a broken arm, he insists on waiting on me; nor will he allow another to take his place for an hour.

" 'I am too ill and weak to write more. Good-by, dear son. And if it should be that I am never to see your face again, remember that I have nothing but love for you, in spite of the estrangement that has kept us apart during the past months.

" 'HANNIBAL T. COTESWORTH.' "

There was a long silence when Alan had finished the reading. No one cared to be the first to break it. Grandma Fletcher's blue eyes had filled with tears which she was very frankly wiping away, and the four young people were as tongue-tied as though a spell had been laid on them. Even the irrepressible Ronny was for once speechless. At last Grandma herself broke the silence:

"What a pity, what an awful pity, that my father should never have known how the old judge felt at the last! He grieved about it all

the rest of his life—that estrangement from his father."

"I quite understand how he must have," said Alan. "But there is something about all this that you have not thought of, Mrs. Fletcher, and I must call it to your attention. This will, which is undoubtedly the last one the judge ever made and which of course revokes all others, changes the whole aspect of things, even now. It left Cotesworth Hall to your father, and now it naturally belongs to you. Since this is the case, Stepney Pettigrew, down in St. Augustine, is not the owner and cannot sell the property to Mr. Speer. There will be a good deal of legal readjustment to be done, and I had better go at once and get in touch with Mr. Speer by telegraph and either recall him or join him in Florida. I take it for granted that since the property is legally yours, you doubtless have no desire now to part with it, and Mr. Speer will have to look farther if he intends to buy a plantation."

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Grandma, dusting her hands together distractedly. "Just let me think! This is all so unexpected . . . out of a clear sky . . . that I hardly know which way

to turn. But one thing I do feel very sure of. As a piece of property, I haven't the least desire to retain Pettigrew's Folly. I have no associations with the place that are not painful, and I should certainly never want to renovate it and live there. I am in far from affluent circumstances and I should much prefer the money it would bring and the comfort that it would represent in improvements on this house and a nest-egg laid by to leave to Naomi and Enid, here, some day. I think I can say right now that if I am proved beyond a doubt to be the rightful owner of Pettigrew's, and if Mr. Speer still wishes to buy it, I'll thank him to take it off my hands."

"Hooray!" shouted Ronny, jumping up with a whoop. "I was dead scared we were going to lose the place! I'm just daffy about it now! Ain't you, Leila?"

And to the astonishment of all, Miss Leila Speer, the Shoe King's daughter, once interested in little else but the department stores and the movies, dabbed her pretty brown eyes shamefacedly with a wisp of a handkerchief and sniffed:

"You said it! I'm crazy about it too!"

A mild, dreamy morning in the late fall, and the sweet-gums a blaze of crimson glory on the lawn of Pettigrew's Folly. None would have recognized the scene as the unkempt abandoned estate of a few months before. The grounds were trim and well tended, the old mansion, while retaining all the fine lines and features of its original outline, was now restored to beauty and dignity. An air of prosperity and leisure enfolded it and almost one might expect to see the crinolined ladies and booted and spurred horsemen of the fifties emerge from one of its long French windows.

But instead four young people stepped out on the veranda and ran down the lawn, to stand by the sun-dial which occupied its center.

"I wanted you girls to see it the minute it was fixed," said Ronny. "That's why I sent the car to bring you right over. Ain't it great to see it set up here just like it used to be? Alan 'tended to that. He studied it all out and figured just how it had been, base and all, and Dad gave him the free hand to get it just the way I liked."

"I think it was wonderful of your father to allow you to keep the old house just as it was, and not tear it down and build a modern one.

It's perfectly beautiful now, inside and out!"

"Sure thing!" agreed Ronny. "I just couldn't see tearing down that dandy old place after all that had happened. And I talked to Dad nearly all one night till he agreed to leave it as it is. And now he's as keen about it as Leila and I are. And Alan begged him to put up the sundial and get that big base for it. Do you know what Dad said when he saw it yesterday? He stood here looking at it and at the house yonder a long time and then he said: 'Son, you were right to insist on keeping the place as it is. I think we'll call it 'Cotesworth Hall,' like it used to be. It sort of makes me wish I'd been born and brought up in a place like this—with all its traditions behind it!'

"And that," added Ronny, "was a whole lot for my dad to say!"

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